The DIRTY WAY to DESTROY the GODDESS'S HEROES
4
Regretfully, There Are More Oddballs
SAKUMA SASAKI
Illustration by
ASAGI TOSAKA

Table of Contents

Insert
Title Page
Copyright
Prologue
Chapter 1: Nature Venture with the Demon Diva: Who Are Those Mysterious Long Ears Living in the Secret Forest?!
Intermission: A Day in the Life of the Saint
Chapter 2: Dark Depths
Intermission: A Day in the Life of the Holy Mother
Chapter 3: Screams of the Dead
Intermission: A Day in the Life of the Demon King
Epilogue
Afterword
Yen Newsletter

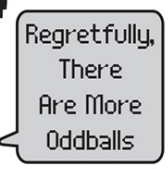
The DIRTY WAY to DESTROY the GODDESS'S HEROES

4 Regretfully, There Are More Oddballs

"That's all to say we're *proud* of our flat racks! They're practically proof we're noble elves!"
Shinichi Sotoyama
The Demon King's Twisted Advisor.
Celes
A dark elven girl who spews abuse with her foul mouth.
"Why can't the boys just understand?"
Arian
One of the Goddess's heroes.
"You're an elf with dark skin, huh? ...I read about your kind in books — all about the legendary dark elves!"
"I bet she's a smutty pervert!"
"From the moment I saw your excessively fat rack, I was jealo— I mean, I *knew* you were a degenerate!"
Clarissa
An elven girl who spews abuse with her foul mouth.
"The bigger the boobs, the bigger the idiot!"
Clarissa's Friends
They keep an eye on Clarissa.

In front of Shinichi and his crew, Arian ripped the hat off their stalker—revealing a baby-faced girl with glasses and ears of standard length.
“Who are you?”
Trembling with fear, the stalker managed to name herself.
“I-I’m Fey. An explorer.”

The DIRTY WAY to DESTROY the GODDESS'S HEROES



4

SAKUMA SASAKI

Illustration by **ASAGI TOSAKA**

YEN ON

New York

Copyright

The Dirty Way to Destroy the Goddess's Heroes
Sakuma Sasaki
Translation by Jordan Taylor
Cover art by Asagi Tosaka
This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.
MEGAMI NO YUSHA WO TAOSU GESU NA HOHO Vol. 4 OKINODOKU DESUGA HENJIN HA HUETESHIMAIMASHITA
©Sakuma Sasaki 2018
First published in Japan in 2018 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.
English translation © 2020 by Yen Press, LLC
Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.
The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.
Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001
Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress
First Yen On Edition: August 2020
Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Sasaki, Sakuma (Novelist), author. | Tosaka, Asagi, illustrator. | Taylor, Jordan (Translator), translator.

Title: The dirty way to destroy the goddess’s heroes / Sakuma Sasaki ; illustration by Asagi Tosaka ; translation by Jordan Taylor.
Description: New York, NY : Yen On, 2019. | Series: The dirty way to destroy the goddess’s heroes ; Volume 1
Identifiers: LCCN 2019011081 | ISBN 9781975357115 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975357139 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975357153 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975357177 (v. 4 : pbk.)
Classification: LCC PL875.5.A76 O613 2019 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019011081
ISBNs: 978-1-9753-5717-7 (paperback)
978-1-9753-5718-4 (ebook)
E3-20200723-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter 1: Nature Venture with the Demon Diva: Who Are Those Mysterious Long Ears Living in the Secret Forest?!

Intermission: A Day in the Life of the Saint

Chapter 2: Dark Depths

Intermission: A Day in the Life of the Holy Mother

Chapter 3: Screams of the Dead

Intermission: A Day in the Life of the Demon King

Epilogue

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

contents

Prologue

Chapter 1
Nature Venture with the Demon Diva: Who Are Those Mysterious Long Ears Living in the Secret Forest?!

Intermission
A Day in the Life of the Saint

Chapter 2
Dark Depths

Intermission
A Day in the Life of the Holy Mother

Chapter 3
Screams of the Dead

Intermission
A Day in the Life of the Demon King

Epilogue

Illustration by
Asagi Tosaka

Prologue

In slow pulses, a cluster of crystals gently glowed in a sprawling, dim room. A woman lay there, eyes closed, as she quietly continued to slumber.

She wasn't resting in the human sense; she had no biological need to sleep in the first place. In fact, her consciousness was completely intact in this state, selecting who would receive her blessing from time to time.

But to avoid wasting even an ounce of her strength, she slumbered.

Her power came from the prayers of her devout followers.

And how could she possibly squander the prayers of the pious, who continued to amass day by day?

She had slept this way for two hundred years—until she felt a sudden chill run through her.

What was that?

Awoken from her long slumber, she left her body behind in the dark as her seeing eye shot into the sky.

Heading in the direction of this ominous sensation, she flew over forests, over rivers, threading through the trees as fast as light.

That was when she saw something horrific.

The army fleeing in defeat. Soldiers hauling the bodies of three thousand corpses with gouged hearts.

Far behind, she saw the one who had committed the atrocity, his face twisted in rage despite his calm observation of the army.

He was a giant twice as tall as any human, skin a deep blue, with massive horns sprouting from either side of his head. It was a strange form, impossible to describe as human, housing explosive amounts of magic no man could withstand.

—A demon!

Her perfectly shaped lips pursed in hatred.

The demons. Enemies to mankind. Dirty, nasty things. They had managed to live on, even after they had been pushed underground.

I must annihilate him.

The complete destruction of the demons—and their original sin. This was her reason for being. She had never once let wrath slip from her consciousness, even as it lay dormant for thousands of years. But now, it had awoken.

"Hmm?"

The giant blue demon suddenly looked in her direction, as if he had sensed her hostility. Immediately, she cut off her seeing eye that she'd sent away, settling back into her resting body in the darkened room.

I must investigate.

The demon on the surface had to be considerably powerful. But just how strong? Would her blessed believers be able to take him down?

Undetected from a distance, she would need to monitor him closely, secretly, before making a decision. It would be best if her followers were able to defeat him on their own, for nothing good would come out of carelessly revealing herself in front of people. But if he was too much for them—

“Then I will destroy him.”

The Goddess Elazonia spoke for the first time in hundreds of years, fire blazing in her eyes.

Chapter 1
Nature Venture with the Demon Diva: Who Are Those Mysterious Long Ears Living in the Secret Forest?!

Uverse. A midsize town with a population of a thousand located in the eastern part of the continent of Uropeh.

With grapes abounding, this little region was famous for its wine. Other than that, it was a totally average town, absent of distinctive features—until now.

Unparalleled terror had swallowed the town, dissolving into chaos.

“Aaaaaah—!”

The vineyards roared with red flames. Townspeople bolted away from the blaze, screaming at the top of their lungs.

If this had been a normal fire, they would have desperately tried to extinguish the flames that threatened their livelihood, but that wouldn’t do in this case.

Standing firmly in the hellfire was an incredible creature towering over the houses, flames spewing from its fanged maw.

Its body wasn’t covered in scales but stony armor, and it balanced on its hind legs and tail. It was obviously the legendary beast—a dragon.

“Wh-why is a dragon here of all places…?”

“Didn’t the Goddess Elazonia seal them away?!”

There was no way for the townspeople to fight against the stone dragon that had suddenly ravaged their vineyards. They could only shake in terror as they watched.

From the sky, a strange figure took in the entire scene, letting out a shrill laugh.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! You humans and your ignorance! Use your last breath to scamper away in shame!”

Under the black mask, the mysterious person was the unholy priest, the True One. The dark elf who accompanied him used magic to amplify his voice, making his evil words boom across the town.

“Elazok—the Evil God, the divine, the great ruler of the world—has no need for filthy followers of the Goddess. Squirm, writhe, suffer until you meet your end!” cried the unholy priest.

The stone dragon blasted out another burst of fire, scorching the field of grapes.

“If this continues, our vineyards will be destroyed!”

“Someone… Anyone…! Please save us…”

Right when the townspeople gave into despair, crying out for their final salvation…

“Rain, rain, come this way! Please let lots fall down today! *Squall.*”

As soon as the townspeople heard the cute voice across the vineyards, the sky gathered with rain clouds, and heavy rain started to pour down from the heavens and quench the flames ravaging the vineyards.

“What?! How could someone use magic to make a storm?!”

This spell couldn’t even be compared to that of the church priests in this town. Even as the townspeople cried out in surprise, they turned toward the voice that had summoned the rain.

Before them was a young girl with pearly skin and glossy black hair—Rino. And…

“Arian the Red, you’ve come!!”

The young heroine’s crimson scarf and hair whipped around with the wind.

“Unholy priest! True One! Your evil deeds end here!” she shouted, drawing her magic sword from the sheath on her hip, dashing toward the stone dragon across the charred vineyards.

“Hi-yah!”

Arian let out a courageous cry as she brought her sword down from over her head, carrying out a vicious slash and slicing the stone dragon in two with one strike.

“Oooh! Wow!” the townspeople cried in joyous surprise, as the unholy priest shook with rage on the other side.

“Damn you, Arian! Curse you, Rino! How dare you stand in our way!” he cried.

“Scheme all you want in secret! Evil will never triumph!” shouted Arian.

“Exactly. Bad eggs will always be taught a lesson!” Rino called out.

“*Tsk.* I’ll play nice and retreat for today… Resist with every fiber of your being, but the time will come when you will crumble before Elazok’s power! Ah-ha-ha!” shot back the unholy priest, getting the last say as the dark elf recited the incantation for *Invisibility*. The two seemed to melt into the clear blue sky.

“Justice always prevails!” announced Arian happily as she struck a heroic pose.

“It’s safe now, everyone,” Rino said, her behavior far more gentle.

The townspeople burst out in hoots of joy when they witnessed Rino’s angelic figure paired with Arian’s brave stance.

“They did it! They saved us!”

“Thank you, miss!”

Those cheering for Arian and Rino had no way of knowing the whole thing was orchestrated by the unholy priest, the True One—known to us as Shinichi Sotoyama, the advisor to the Demon King.

With no imminent danger, the townspeople quickly got to work cleaning up the blackened vineyard. Among the fray was Shinichi, having changed from his costume, acting none the wiser about the charade.

"I'm so sorry for making you help us. I mean, you're just a traveling companion of the hero," apologized one elderly farmer.

"Don't worry about it. It's our mission to help people who've fallen victim to Elazok the Evil God," replied Shinichi, flashing a pearly-white smile.

"*Says the arsonist*," Celes snapped in a telepathic message as she snapped grapevines from the field.

Shinichi acted like he didn't hear anything, continuing his conversation with the elderly farmer. "What an unfortunate situation."

"I never doubted the Goddess's teachings, but I didn't actually think the Evil God existed. What a shock."

"I know exactly how you feel, but the Evil God is real. I don't believe he'll try to attack this town again since he failed once, but don't let your guard down."

"Of course." The farmer was very gullible.

Celes couldn't keep herself from sighing. "You're practically a religious door knocker."

"In the religious handbook, it's standard to incite fear to get people to believe in your version of god. Speaking of, are there any religions in the demon world?" Shinichi telepathized.

"The major religions worship the Blue God who became our sun or the almighty Black Dragon. I respect the Blue God and the Black Dragon, but I loathe the stubbornness of the more devout believers."

"Ha-ha. I guess that's the same whether you're human, demon, or an earthling." Shinichi chuckled on the inside, but he kept his facial expression serious as he continued to help clean up the blackened grapevines.

The church of the Goddess Elazonia versus the demons led by King Ludabite the Blue Demon. The battle between these two groups gave birth to the imaginary third party: Elazok the Evil God.

To convince the good people of Elazok's existence and maintain the cease-fire, Shinichi was traveling around to put on these heroic reenactments.

"That said, I'm glad they attacked this particular field. These grapes were already suffering from root rot, and we were planning on burning this whole vineyard before it spread," the elderly farmer remarked.

"Really. That's a silver lining if I ever heard of one," said Shinichi, feigning ignorance.

In reality, he had visited the town as Manju the merchant a day prior, trying to suss out the talk of the town. He had already learned about the infestation and intentionally aimed to scorch this field.

I know Rino would get upset if I hurt innocent civilians, even if it brings peace to demonkind, he thought, glancing at Rino who was on the edge of the vineyard, swarmed by the townspeople.

“Pain, pain, fly away! *Full Healing…* Great. How does it feel now?”

“My gosh! I can’t believe it. My chest pain is gone! You know, the town priest couldn’t heal me at all when I asked,” replied Rino’s patient.

“I’m so happy for you, dear. This is to cover the costs… I know it’s not enough, but…,” started the spouse.

“Oh no! You don’t need to give me any money. All I want is to see everyone smile,” interjected Rino.

Her smile was the very definition of purity and love, the exact opposite of a certain person who only looked to profit from everything. The townspeople were struck by her kindness, falling to their knees.

“So mature for a girl younger than my grandchild!”

“Selfless. Loving. Beautiful… You couldn’t possibly be the Goddess Rino, could you?!”

“What? Who?” asked Rino.

“No, seriously. What are they talking about?” Shinichi balked.

He stopped cleaning up the vines, running over upon hearing the strange name for the first time. It couldn’t be some sort of mistake.

The one who had called her a goddess—a middle-aged traveling peddler—recounted his experience, emotion coating his voice.

“It must have been two weeks ago. I was traveling and was set on by the worst stomachache. I was on death’s door, stuck in a tiny village that didn’t even have a priest. But then, that tender traveling Saint came along.”

“When you say ‘Saint,’ you don’t mean…,” started Shinichi.

“Yes, Lady Sanctina,” answered the peddler.

“Ugh!” Shinichi let out an involuntary groan at the name.

He had intentionally ditched Sanctina at the Demon King’s castle, since she endangered Rino’s chastity, but it seemed like she had come running after them.

“She healed my stomachache, and I offered her my every worldly possession as thanks, but she refused to accept anything. Instead, she told me, ‘The Goddess Rino says that love is free,’” continued the peddler.

What the hell is that degenerate going around telling people?! Shinichi stopped short of howling out loud, but he was fuming on the inside.

Sanctina was tailing them and giving free healings as she went, sowing the seeds for a new religion under the “Goddess” Rino.

“I’m ashamed to admit it, but I had deceived people through my trade until then… Her words opened my eyes. I have abandoned my selfish desires, and I treasure my love for my customers above all else!”

“Uh-huh…”

“It’s all thanks to the Saint and to the Goddess Rino!” cried out the peddler.

“I-I’m happy I could help,” said Rino, a little confused. But she continued smiling as he squeezed her hands, tears of gratitude brimming in his eyes.

Right then, someone else called out from behind the crowd of people.

“Did you say Rino? You mean the Diva has come to this town?!”

“What now?!” barked Shinichi.

The crowd split, and a woman stepped forward. She was wearing a grass-colored cap with a short lute slung across her back. She must have been a traveling minstrel.

“A little girl who’s scary beautiful. Jet-black hair. Ruby eyes… There’s no mistake! You’re the real thing—the superstar Rino herself! Ohmygosh! May I please get your autograph?”

“You’ve heard of me?” asked Rino as the minstrel fangirled, holding out her lute and a quill, urging Rino to sign her instrument.

The minstrel nodded emphatically.

“Why, of course! Rino the Diva is the extraordinary singer who breathed fresh air into the staleness of the minstrel world. All our songs just added lyrics about the Goddess or heroes to music, but yours are totally different. Relatable love stories from the perspective of a normal girl. An entirely new sound. Dance accompaniments in performances. All capture the hearts of audience members. It’s practically guaranteed to get a standing ovation and rake in money! You’re a legend!”

“This has become a bigger deal than we thought…,” muttered Shinichi.

“With your songs that I learned for free, I’ve already earned ten gold coins!”

“Who the hell taught—? Oh, that guy.” Shinichi managed to come to his own conclusion halfway through his sentence.

It had to be the young minstrel in the mining country of Tigris who used his lute to accompany Rino during her big debut for…er, *reasons*. He had left Tigris in a huff after the holy warriors had treated him poorly. Shinichi had wondered what became of him. Turns out, he had been traveling around, spreading Rino’s songs.

“Do you mean Mr. Minstrel? Oh, I’m embarrassed and very happy to know people have heard my songs,” said Rino.

“Mighty generous of him to teach those songs for free,” quipped Shinichi.

Obviously, the civilizations of this world didn’t know a thing about copyright laws or have any organizations to ban infringement. But it would make sense for minstrels to take it into their own hands to punish those who were making the big bucks by copying popular songs without permission; that was Shinichi’s main concern.

The lady minstrel said quietly, “This stays between us: He actually taught me because I agreed to spread rumors to ruin the reputation of the church.”

Apparently, the tongue-lashing he had received from the holy warriors hadn’t sat right with him. Shinichi felt a shiver run up his spine, thinking about how minstrels could be one’s worst nightmare when they put everything into defaming someone.

I feel bad for the church for making an enemy of the mass media…

The Internet wasn’t a thing in this world. Neither were radios or newspapers. That meant normal people who couldn’t use *Telepathy* had to rely on traveling merchants or minstrels to learn about the world beyond.

The minstrels had a tight grip on the transmission of information: If they said something was white, the people would have no choice but to believe them—even if the thing in question was black. Now that the church had made an enemy of the minstrels, it was possible for public opinion to eventually start plummeting down.

“A song is mightier than the sword,” huh? I mean, even Cú Chulainn ended up dead because of a minstrel.

Shinichi let out a small sigh, though he did feel encouraged to know the minstrels were on his side.

The minstrel was ecstatic as she grabbed her signed lute.

“Rino, you have to do one song with me! This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me to hear the legendary Diva in person!”

“What?! B-but I should continue healing and cleaning up the vineyards…,” Rino mumbled, panicking.

“The vineyards are already done,” Arian happily assured her.

They all turned around to see her gripping a hoe, standing next to a mountain of scorched vines and roots.

“It was much easier than plowing the ground in Dog Valley!”

“Sure. But you’ve gone too far,” said Celes with a sigh as she pointed to the farmers.

Naturally, the stone dragon had made them afraid, but the sight of the young girl plowing through the diseased roots at inhuman speeds had frightened them just as much.

“Well, if things are all cleaned up, it shouldn’t be a problem. Won’t you sing for us, Rino?” asked Shinichi.

“Hmm… I haven’t practiced in a while. I’m not sure if I’ll sound good…”

“We won’t care if you mess up. I’d love to hear your cute voice. It’s been so long.”

“If it’s for you, I’ll try my best, Shinichi!” Rino exclaimed. Her gloomy expression broke into a smile directed at her favorite person.

“You’ve become a real womanizer.” *Squeeze.* Celes pinched his back.

“It was just to make things easier for all of us, Celes…,” Shinichi tried to justify, making excuses.

Arian pouted when she saw them huddled close together. “Hey, let’s make a stage for Rino’s concert!”

“Uh… Sure!”

“…As you wish,” said Celes, even though she didn’t seem to be satisfied with his explanation.

They started getting things ready, lining up the tavern’s tables in the town square to make a simple stage. It was time for the Rino the Superstar Goddess concert.

“Is everyone ready?!”

“““YEEEAH—!”””

The concert was a smashing success. They even set aside some time for Rino to have a meet and greet with her fans. After everything, the townspeople brought local wines and grapes for a big banquet.

“Wow, these little grapes are supersweet! They’re more delicious than the ones from the mountains!” exclaimed Rino.

“It’s because we grow them with care and hard work. Here, eat up,” said one of the farmers.

“Hmm, white wine has sweet tones. It’s divine,” Celes commented.

“Right? It pairs well with fish. We have many customers who come all the way from the seaside cities to buy it.”

“I’m not the biggest fan of wine, but I think I’ll have some grape juice,” said Arian.

The townspeople had thrown this together to thank them for saving the town. In between mountains of food, the girls enjoyed the banquet with huge smiles.

As for Shinichi, he was sitting away from them, engaged in a pleasant chat with the minstrel and peddler.

“To perform with Rino herself. This is the story of the century!” chirped the minstrel.

“You know, our wine would fly off the shelves if we claimed the grapes were crushed by the Goddess Rino herself… Oh, but that’s practically blasphemous! Please forgive me, my Saint!” cried the peddler.

“I actually think that perv would be overjoyed,” added Shinichi.

Both were looking to spread Rino’s good word.

Shinichi forced a smile and used a different tactic to get some intel. “By the way, have you heard about where Elazok had been spotted? Or any stories about the Evil God’s whereabouts?”

“No. I’d heard rumors that you were fighting his minions, but that’s about it…”

“I don’t remember hearing anything about the Evil God,” added the minstrel.

“I see…” Shinichi acted disappointed before moving on to his real question. “Then have you heard of anyone who’s seen the Goddess?”

“The Goddess is right over there!” cried the peddler.

“I’m not talking about Rino. I mean the Goddess Elazonia,” clarified Shinichi.

The minstrel looked at Shinichi with skepticism. “Hmm? Why would you care about the Goddess Elazonia?”

“I imagine the Goddess knows the whereabouts of the Evil God. Maybe she could lend us her power if the Evil God did return or something.”

“I suppose,” said the minstrel with a nod.

Obviously, Shinichi’s explanation was a mountain of lies. His real goal was to find Elazonia and destroy the system that created the undying heroes whose existence alone threw the world into instability.

Three hundred years ago, she abruptly came into being and used heroes to build her religion. I have no doubt that she exists.

There were only the two people who’d seen her: Eument, the first pope, and ex-Bishop Hube. Both were given impossible power upon meeting her.

Hube had led an army of ten thousand heroes against the Demon King. But when he failed, he was offed, dissolved into a sandy powder from which he could never be resurrected.

She enslaves people by granting them infinite resurrections, then destroys them when they end up serving no utility. She is the cruelest Goddess. And she definitely exists.

The problem was he had absolutely no leads about her true location.

“Vermeita, the Holy Mother, let me flip through the archives in the Archbasilica, but I wasn’t able to find anything on potential whereabouts of the Evil God or even the Goddess… I know I’m grasping at straws, but I’m just trying to find anything at all,” said Shinichi.

“I see. It is a global threat, after all,” agreed the minstrel with a grave nod and a serious expression as she thought. “All I know about those two entities is based on the holy book from the church.”

“Would you happen to know any other legends, excluding those about the Goddess—stories predating the church, tales about the Evil God’s army bringing the world to the brink of extinction?” pressed Shinichi.

“Why are you interested in those old stories?”

“I couldn’t find any information even after searching the church records. Which leaves me no choice but to search for something outside of the church.”

“I guess. But I only know one ancient story. It’s the one where the human woman falls in love with the god of the forest, but I couldn’t detect any information in it about the two divine entities.” The minstrel started to sing softly, strumming her lute.

“In the past, there were more stories passed through song. Perhaps they contained something, but the church declared there were no gods other than the Goddess Elazonia. Most of the stories were lost.”

“I see…” Shinichi’s shoulders slumped a little. Another dead end.

The peddler glanced at him, remembering something.

“If you’re looking for old stories…well, I imagine the elves might know.”

“The elves?” Shinichi parroted back in surprise, quickly glancing at Celes who was disguised under *Illusion*. “There are elves who have broken out to the surface?”

“Yes. If you head east from here, you’ll come to a large forest known as Cemetarium Forest. That’s where the elves live.”

“Oh, I know about that. There’s stories about love between elves and humans!” gushed the minstrel, strumming her lute and singing again.

Shinichi listened. He was convinced of something. “I thought the only race living aboveground was humans, but I guess there are elves, too.”

After all, the dvergr and dark elves were treated the same as demons, too. Shinichi had just assumed that all nonhumans lived below the ground.

“The elves refuse any contact with humans. I’ve heard they’ll kill you on sight. Yeesh. Scary. That’s why many people haven’t seen them,” added the peddler.

“I guess love between an elf and a human can only happen in song…,” noted the minstrel, lamenting the lack of romance in the world.

A few seats down, Celes made a face like she wanted to say something, but Shinichi didn’t notice, continuing with his questions.

“So these elves might know something. Don’t tell me they live for thousands of years,” Shinichi said.

“I’ve never heard of elves having a long life span. But like I said, the elves don’t associate with humans. They developed their own culture, which means they might know legends and stories outside of the church,” replied the peddler.

“And then there’s that story about those old ruins called the Elven Tomb that exist in Cemetarium Forest,” added the minstrel.

“Old ruins?” repeated Shinichi, eyebrows arching in surprise.

“You heard that right. The elves apparently call it their graveyard or their birthplace. Legend has it, incredible treasure lies there!” the minstrel boasted with sparkling eyes as she imagined mountains of silver and gold.

The corners of Shinichi’s mouth pulled up in a grin. He had the feeling that treasure did sleep there but in the form of information.

“Elven ruins, huh? I’m interested, even if it has nothing to do with the Evil God or Goddess.”

“You should be careful,” the peddler cautioned Shinichi, who seemed eager to go. “Elves are known for hating humans. I doubt they’ll just let you into the ruins.”

“Especially since the heroes of the church are supposedly trying to destroy the tomb,” added the minstrel.

“You don’t say. Now you’ve really caught my attention,” said Shinichi with a wider grin. It felt like he’d just discovered a footprint left by the unknown Goddess.

Once the banquet was over, Shinichi's group returned to their rooms in the inn where Celes used *Telepathy* to meet with the Holy Mother Vermeita. The heroes reported to her in the Holy City.

"*You're right. The church has dispatched heroes to destroy the Elven Tomb*," Vermeita immediately admitted when Shinichi repeated what the peddler had told him.

"I would have preferred to hear all important information when we stopped by the Holy City," said Shinichi.

"I apologize. We were so busy. It slipped my mind."

Vermeita was talking about appeasing the masses who were blaming the church for all that had transpired. There was one incident in particular: Once called the Messiah, Bishop Hube had been revealed to be an agent of the Evil God. With her hands full, Vermeita was able to grant Shinichi permission to view the archives and provide necessary maps, but she hadn't had any time to sit down with him.

"Oh yeah. You looked like you'd pulled an all-nighter."

"Yes, I hadn't slept for five days," she replied.

"…Excuse me?"

"I mean, seventy percent of our clergy had been turned into heroes by Hube, sent far away to battle the Demon King. When you came, thirty days had passed without them. Everyone who remained in the Holy City was practically worked to the bone."

"……" Shinichi was at a loss for words. Just imagining it made him feel sick.

Say there was a company on Earth with 70 percent of their employees away on a thirty-day business trip. They would be totally screwed. The church had only been able to overcome this hardship with magic.

"Any bodily fatigue, and I would use Healing. Any need for sleep, and I would use Awaken. If I died, the Goddess would resurrect me. Working around the clock at this age is difficult."

"*That's totally an abuse of power*," Shinichi added with a grimace.

He was in between admiration and fear of the Holy Mother, who had just described hell as "difficult." If death from overwork was impossible, it was basically an infinite inferno.

"But of course, by taking things to the extreme, it's not only your body that endures a big hit but your soul as well. More than a hundred of our clergy have disappeared from the Holy City."

"Well, any normal person would run."

"And those sent to attack the Demon King have abandoned us. They couldn't handle the stigma of becoming a fake hero, deceived by an unholy priest. There were close to a thousand of them who just left."

“I can understand where they’re coming from. But they’re really spineless.”

“Plus, there was a faction of extreme believers who would not accept the cease-fire with the demons. They left, too. In total, our clergy is down to seventy percent.”

“Ugh…” Shinichi recoiled, even though he was basically the one who instigated all this major loss.

Arian and Rino were sitting next to him and listening to the telepathic messages, hanging their heads apologetically.

“I am so sorry, Lady Vermeita. I can’t believe the remaining people are forced to work so hard…,” said Arian.

“It’s all our fault. I’m so very sorry,” offered Rino.

The two apologized, but the Holy Mother smiled like she’d caught a pair of children up to some mischief.

“Arian, Rino. No need to feel sorry. It was our fault that Hube got out of control. We’ve reaped what we sowed,” added Vermeita.

“But…”

“All the clergy, including myself, view this as an opportunity to reexamine ourselves. We should actually be grateful for what you’ve done.”

“Grammy Vermeita, you’re too nice…,” said Rino.

The Holy Mother was the true personification of grace as she took sole responsibility for the situation. Both Rino and Arian couldn’t help feeling moved.

Shinichi butted into the conversation with a cold look in his eyes.

“I mean, in all seriousness, there’s no reason we should be concerned. And you can quit this sob story to get our sympathy.”

“*Hmm, I’ve been found out*,” Vermeita admitted without a trace of shame.

“What?! Was your whole story a lie?” yelped Rino in shock.

“No, I did die from overwork, and the number of clergy in the Archbasilica has dropped,” replied Vermeita gently before explaining in simplified terms. “The church and the demons are still enemies, even though we have the cease-fire in place, and I am personally allied with the demons. I’m relieved we don’t have enough soldiers to fight. There is no need for you to feel sorry.”

“But you have to remember that Arian and Rino are good people,” Shinichi reasoned. “It might not be the case for me or Celes, but they’ll get down on themselves if their actions have caused hardships for others. Right now, it’s a minor inconvenience, but it’s something that others could use to force concessions in future negotiations.”

“Taking advantage of others’ kindness? You’re horribly wicked for a Holy Mother,” Celes judged.

Vermeita chuckled at Shinichi’s cool analysis and Celes’s direct criticism. “Hee-hee. Perceiving someone’s true intent is essential in leading people, you know. Consider this a lesson learned. Rino, your purity is a

virtue, but if you seek coexistence between the humans and demons, you must become more comfortable with conversations like these."

"*Y-yes!*" replied the girl.

"*Trying to garner her favor again, huh? You really are a troublesome old hag*," cursed Shinichi, somewhat concerned that Rino fell for the Holy Mother's words too easily. But it was a good lesson on social interactions, so he decided to continue their telepathic meeting. *"Let's get back on track. It's true that the church has dispatched heroes to destroy the Elven Tomb, right?"*

"*Correct*," replied Vermeita.

"Which means something there spells bad news for the church?"

"That would be my guess." She refused to say anything outright. However, that wasn't due to a desire to protect the church or herself; she really didn't know the reason why. "We have been attempting to destroy the ruins for more than two hundred years in accordance with orders left by the first pope, Eument. However, there are no oral legends nor any written records remaining that explain his motive."

"That's terrible! You can't just destroy the elves' graves without a good reason!" objected Rino angrily.

Her pout made Arian smile. "But the fact that you've continued to try must mean you haven't been able to do it in all this time."

"Yes. Their numbers are scant, but the elves are all great magic users, capable of fending off even our most veteran heroes. In fact, I was left beaten within an inch of my life when I tried to pursue them in my youth," explained Vermeita.

"You *were almost* killed*?!*" screeched Arian, unable to hide her shock.

The Holy Mother was among the most powerful magic users in all humanity. Sure, she would have been inexperienced when she was younger, but Arian couldn't believe she suffered a total loss at the hands of the elves.

"It seems you haven't heard much about the elves in the east since you've spent your time in the Boar Kingdom in the west. But if you had continued your journey as a hero, I bet you would have had the chance to grapple with some elves," said Vermeita.

"*I'll pass...*," replied Arian.

After all, the elves weren't bandits or anything. They weren't doing anything wrong by protecting a monument. Arian felt queasy at the thought of attacking them for the church.

Vermeita smiled mischievously at Arian's naïveté. "Or would you rather whip criminals at Mouse, the labor camp up north?"

"That's worse!"

"Oh, really? Because the bandits you caught in the past were sent there, forced into a life of heavy labor."

"Uuugh..."

There was no way Arian would win in a battle of words against the wicked Holy Mother, so she was forced to concede.

“Hey, hey! Could you refrain from bullying my hero?” Unable to witness this any longer, Shinichi stepped in, steering the conversation back on track again. “Geez. A final order to destroy the protected ruins of overpowered elves? How dull.”

“If I may be entirely honest, I would prefer to drop the entire thing as soon as possible. I consider it a waste of our valuable manpower,” replied Vermeita.

“But disrespecting the orders of the first pope would negatively affect the church’s reputation. Meaning you have to continue even if you don’t like it.”

“Exactly. I’m a little annoyed at Pope Eument for his busybodying,” lamented Vermeita with a sigh born from years of stress. “Well, it was somewhat useful as a sort of trial by fire: New heroes get experience fighting and losing against powerful magic users, which puts the newbies in their place. But these past few years, we’ve had some trouble…”

“What kind?”

“I think it would be best for you to see for yourself,” said Vermeita, avoiding the question.

Shinichi elected not to press her further. “Based on what you’re telling me, the only goal is to destroy the ruins. The orders don’t include annihilating the elves themselves.”

“You’re alarmingly collected when you talk about the most horrifying things,” interjected Celes with disgust, but she did get his point. “It does seem strange that the church would order the deaths of all demons but hold no hostility toward the elves.”

“So what’s going on there?” asked Shinichi.

Vermeita answered simply. “The orders left by Pope Eument are only to destroy the ruins. There’s not a single word remaining that suggests we must kill the elves. On the other hand, there is nothing decreeing we must not kill them, either.”

“That said, they’re favored over the demons, who are at the top of the kill list… Dark elves are bad, but normal elves are just fine, huh? I’ll never understand the church’s standards.”

“Don’t ask me. It’s what the Goddess decided.” Vermeita put on a pained smile before dropping her tone. “My guess is that Pope Eument wasn’t the one who ordered the destruction of the ruins. It must have been from the Goddess herself.”

“*And your proof?*” asked Shinichi.

“If we’re to believe anything in the holy book, Pope Eument was a very honest man. He does not seem the type to demand this without good reason.”

Shinichi sputtered. “Would an ‘honest man’ annihilate tens of thousands of people in Mouse to transform it into a labor camp?”

“Wouldn’t you say he did that because he was honest?”

“*Definitely,*” said Shinichi with a nod and a pained expression.

In history, it wasn't uncommon for the evilest of people, those responsible for massacres, to be lauded for their honesty by their inner circles. Meanwhile, the opposite type of person would be inclined to commit crimes on a smaller scale, offenses that only satisfied their own desires. After all, mass murder wouldn't serve to meet any of their ends: It would just be a big chore.

It was the honest people with a strong sense of justice who made sacrifices for the sake of a "greater cause."

"*I imagine the Goddess told Eument:* By penalizing the tens of thousands of evildoers before your eyes, you will save billions of good people in the future," said Shinichi.

"It's like you were there," said Vermeita with a grimace, visualizing the plausible scene. "Anyway, it's likely there is some connection between the Goddess and the Elven Tomb."

"Thanks. Now I know. But are you okay with this?"

"With what?"

"Helping to uncover the church's true nature," Shinichi provoked.

"……" Vermeita was silent for a moment, but then she gave her answer, heaving out the heaviness that weighed deep in her soul. *"I am not as pure of heart as Sir Effectus."*

Her faith in the Goddess had been shaken by the tragedies surrounding Hube's actions. Shinichi could see the new fissures in the Holy Mother's heart, but he pretended he didn't notice, laughing it off.

"Heh-heh-heh. Well, we knew you're a little dirty anyway."

"Ha-ha. Says the one who brought that out in me."

The two chuckled in a friendly way.

Rino jumped in, confused. *"What's dirty?"*

"Wine. It's made from dirty, rotten grapes."

"*What?! Will you be okay drinking that?*" she yelped, falling for Shinichi's evasion tactic. He really didn't want her to know about the whole Boys Love thing.

Vermeita chuckled as she listened to their exchange and then spoke up like she'd suddenly remembered something. *"By the way, do you know when Ms. Mimolette's next book will be done?"*

"Hmm, I think it should be done any time now," answered Shinichi.

"Oh, then I'll get my things to visit the Demon King's castle."

"Hey! Don't abandon your post in the Holy City!"

"Oh, it'll be fine. I can just teleport to Boar Kingdom. It should only take me two days to return."

"And I'm saying you shouldn't ditch work!"

"This is work. It'll play an important role in reaching a formal cease-fire with the demons. And while I'm there, I can pick up the new book and submit a request for the next one."

"You're doing a bad job hiding your ulterior motive!"

Vermeita sounded like someone using a business trip as an excuse to go to a fanfic event—essentially, a bad employee.

“I hear you loud and clear. But the children are begging for the next book. As you can see, I’m in a pickle.”

“Why the hell would you show that to the kids at the orphanage?!” screamed Shinichi.

“Don’t worry. I was very careful in selecting the children with potential—and those who I could trust to keep their mouths shut.”

“That’s beside the point!”

“I am a master at spreading gospel.”

“I’ve never been more worried!”

“Well then, I should be on my way. I need to pick up the new book as soon as possible,” finished Vermeita, cutting off their telepathic meeting.

“I think I’ve made a hideous monster…,” muttered Shinichi.

“And it’s all your fault,” quipped Celes.

Shinichi was beginning to feel the full weight of his crimes. He had a vision of the graceful maidens at the orphanage falling to temptation, buying a one-way ticket to hell.

Before leaving Uverse, Shinichi’s group received dried grapes and jams from the townspeople. Placing their little tour on hold, they rushed off to the eastern edge of the continent. Rino supplied Celes with magic to fly, covering the distance in two days. It would have taken them eight days of walking.

They arrived in front of the Cemetarium Forest, the place that housed the Elven Tomb.

“It’s so dense,” Shinichi commented.

The group was standing on a hill in the distance, looking down at the unbroken sea of green leaves that stretched to the horizon. They had no way of seeing how far it went.

“Forests this massive don’t come by often, even in the demon world,” said Celes.

“Looks like there’d be lots of yummy nuts and mushrooms!” Rino beamed.

“It reminds me of the Amazon rain forests. Ugh, I bet it has poisonous snakes and spiders…” Shinichi groaned.

“It’ll be hard to swing a sword between the clusters of trees. I’d rather not go in,” Arian lamented.

Each of them voiced their first impressions as they observed the Cemetarium Forest, but they didn’t see any sign of the elves.

“Maybe they’re not here today?” asked Shinichi.

“No, I think they’re at the edges of the forest,” said Arian cautiously, sensing someone’s eyes on them.

Shinichi patted her gently on the back in encouragement. “Don’t worry. I have no plans of making trouble today. Relax.”

“Oh, all right,” she said meekly, letting the tension go from her shoulders.

“But I would like to check the elves’ main location and their numbers. Celes, can you use *Telescope* or *Clairvoyance*?”

“Just a moment,” she replied before reciting the incantation. She examined the forest in detail. “Lady Arian is right: There is one elf near the edge. I can see a number of them hunting, but I do not see anything that might resemble houses from here.”

“All right. What if we fly? No, that won’t work. They’ll attack us if we do something that suspicious.” He rejected his own suggestion.

Shinichi didn’t think Celes would be killed that easily, but it’d be bad to set the elves on high alert before they even had a chance to negotiate.

“Something more inconspicuous… Oh, could you send your field of vision into the air and look down using magic?”

“Just my vision?” asked Celes.

“I want a bird’s-eye view like a satellite image,” replied Shinichi. He drew a simple diagram in the dirt and explained in straightforward terms.

“In other words, it would be like chucking an eyeball into the air?”

“Yeah. But yuck, what a gross image.”

“Understood. One moment,” said Celes.

She was silent for a second while she formed the image in her mind, then quietly spoke an incantation. “Send my sight into the sky; show me the shape of the earth. *Satellite View.*”

The magic formed an invisible eye that caught the wind and rose higher. Celes felt dizzy, like she was having an out-of-body experience, but she carefully surveyed the ground until she found what she was searching for.

“There it is—the elf settlement.”

“What does it look like?” asked Shinichi.

“Your hand, please.”

Shinichi gripped her outstretched hand, and she used *Link* to transfer the information into his brain.

“I can’t really see. It’s kind of blurry…”

“Please cut me some slack. This is the first time I have tried this spell,” replied Celes.

“I wanna see their home, too!” said Rino out of curiosity, gripping Celes’s other hand. She observed the images that flowed into her. “It’s not very big.”

“You’re right. I’m not even sure there’s a hundred people living there,” said Shinichi.

Deep in the forest, there was a hole in the plane of green that contained yellow fields surrounding gray buildings. From the grainy bird’s-eye view, they still couldn’t see any signs of the elves themselves, but there looked to be no more than thirty buildings in the cluster.

“I suppose villages with a population of less than a hundred aren’t exactly rare in this world…,” said Shinichi as he thought, but Arian interrupted him with a tap on his shoulder.

“More elves are observing us. They’re on guard now.”

“Hmm, all right,” he replied, releasing Celes’s hand and asking her to stop the spell before turning his back to Cemetarium Forest. “We’ve determined their location and numbers. Next up is their strength.”

“Are we going to fight them?” asked Arian uneasily. Rino’s face held the same expression, but Shinichi smiled and tried to reassure them.

“Don’t worry. It’s just a precaution. We can’t negotiate properly if we don’t know how powerful they are.”

If Shinichi’s group was stronger, they could pressure the elves, but if it was the opposite situation, it wouldn’t go very well. This was unimaginable, but if the elves possessed more power than the incredibly powerful Blue Demon King, it would be best to give up on investigating the Elven Tomb. He needed to see the elves’ strength with his own eyes first.

“We have a perfect test ready. We should at least take advantage of it. Heh-heh-heh,” chuckled Shinichi.

“How sick,” snapped Celes as Shinichi flashed his evil grin.

The group said their good-byes to the forest home of the elves for the time being.

About a three-hour walk from Cemetarium Forest was a small town by the name of Oriens. Population five hundred. It served as the frontline base for the heroes engaging in the fight against the elves, a battle that had continued for more than two hundred years.

“Huh. This place doesn’t feel unsafe at all,” observed Shinichi, disappointed, taking in the wheat fields and quaint town streets. “Well, I guess they have no need for city walls, since the elves aren’t going out of their way to attack.”

“Plus, the elves could just blow the walls away with magic,” replied Arian.

As they conversed, the party found and opened the door to the only tavern in the town, which doubled as an inn. There were no customers inside. It must have been because it was past mealtime. But there was a beefcake of a man in his forties polishing the round tables. He looked like he might be the owner.

“Welcome. A group of youngsters all the way in the boonies, huh? Am I right to guess you’re here for the elves?”

“Well, yeah,” said Shinichi, making no attempt to hide it as he walked up to the owner. The group ordered some food. Shinichi tried to nonchalantly cut to the chase. “By the way, could you introduce us to the heroes in town?”

“What can we do for you?” replied the owner.

“…Huh?”

Shinichi and the others all stared dumbfounded at the owner of the tavern as he puffed out his chest, guffawing at them. He showed them the Goddess’s symbol emblazoned on his arm.

“I’m in charge of coordinating the heroes. The name’s Zorkus, but everyone knows me as the owner.”

“Wait, why is a hero running a *tavern*?!” cried Shinichi, voicing the most obvious concern.

The owner shrugged and grinned. “Can’t eat if you don’t work. We don’t defeat monsters or capture bandits here; we just get the crap beat out of us by the elves. Goes without saying the church doesn’t pay us squat.”

“I guess that makes sense,” replied Shinichi.

“There are ten other heroes here—they work in the fields, heal the wounded, sell magically created ice, and so on. We all earn our own keep.”

“Sounds tough…,” said Arian with a sympathetic tear in her eye. She’d faced similar hardships when she’d worked as a monster hunter.

“So what do you need from us?” asked the tavern owner.

“Like I said, we have business with the elves,” replied Shinichi, casting a pointed look at Arian’s right hand. She guessed what he meant and removed her glove. This time, the tavern owner was shocked to see the symbol of the Goddess.

“Huh, you must really be something to get selected as a hero at such a young age,” he marveled.

“Haven’t you ever heard of Arian the Red?” asked Shinichi.

“Nope, sorry. Doesn’t ring a bell. I’ve been here squaring off with the elves for the past ten years, so I don’t know too much about younger folks.”

“Which means you’ve been losing for ten years,” Celes pointed out, but the tavern owner just laughed heartily and avoided acknowledging her comment.

“So you came to defeat the elves?” he asked with a wary look in his eyes. Maybe he was worried they would swoop in and take the prize he’d been eyeing for ten years.

Shinichi smiled, de-escalating the situation. “Well, your goal is destroying the tomb, not the elves.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said the tavern owner, catching his own fist in his other palm like he’d just remembered.

Shinichi couldn’t help feeling like the tavern owner was trying to lull him into a false sense of security, but he pretended like he hadn’t noticed.

“I’ll get to the point. We are here on direct orders from Lady Vermeita to destroy the tomb.”

“Vermeita?” repeated the owner.

Shinichi caught the barely perceptible grimace crossing his face, and the young boy’s eyes narrowed sharply. “Even though she’s been demoted from

cardinal to archbishop, she's one of the leaders of the church. Don't you think it's inappropriate to refer to her without a proper title?"

Shinichi acted like a loyal servant of hers, warning the tavern owner to choose his words carefully—for those words would determine whether they would exchange blows over her honor.

Celes caught onto Shinichi's plan and released magic, her face stone-cold. The owner felt its presence, its strength at least equal to the power of the elves who had killed him on too many occasions to count. He nervously mopped up the cold sweat from his brow as he tried to explain himself.

"Hold up. I didn't mean anything bad by it. It's only because we were actively serving as heroes around the same time."

"I see. Which makes you around the same age as her," replied Shinichi, quickly accepting the explanation and backing down.

The owner sighed in relief. "You know, she attracted all sorts of attention in her teens. People called her the Saint, said she was a genius, that she was different from the rest of us. It's hard for me not to feel jealous and inferior." He scratched his head in embarrassment, remembering his younger days. "I mean, she's the reason why I'm here. I thought everyone would think I was strong if I could just win against the elves that even Vermeita couldn't beat. Real juvenile, I know."

Shinichi couldn't detect any inauthenticity in the tavern owner's expression as he reflected on days gone by. The young boy bowed his head and apologized.

"I'm sorry, I had no intention of opening old wounds…"

"Don't worry about it. After coming here, I found something more precious than status and reputation," replied the owner as he patted Shinichi on the back with a hearty laugh.

"Owww… I guess we don't have any bad blood between us, then. There shouldn't be a problem in asking you for help, right? We can offer you some sort of compensation."

"What exactly do you need?"

"I want to see the elves' strength with my own eyes. I just need you to fight them."

In other words, it was a reconnaissance in force, taking advantage of their bodies as heroes. It was a logical strategy, but no one would jump at the opportunity to be a disposable pawn. That's why Shinichi was bracing himself for the worst possible response, even offering money to sweeten the deal.

Much to his surprise, the tavern owner's eyes shined as he leaned toward Shinichi in excitement. "So you're saying it's all right to fight the elves?"

"Huh?"

"It's only been four days since the last battle, but if Vermeita orders it, we don't have a choice. I need to let everyone know!"

“Hang on a second! I’m not following!” said Shinichi, grabbing ahold of the owner who was about to happily bound out of the tavern. “When you say, ‘It’s all right to fight the elves,’ that makes it sound like you normally don’t.”

“What? Didn’t Vermeita tell you? The rule is that we can only attack the elves once every ten days.”

“And why’s that?” demanded Shinichi in confusion.

The owner warned him it was a long story before going into the details.

“The first pope, Eument, passed away two hundred twenty years ago. Ever since, there have been numerous heroes who have tried to destroy the Elven Tomb.”

In the beginning, there were only a few heroes who were up against this challenge, as spreading the word of the Goddess and defeating monsters took priority. Only one or two heroes who weren’t busy would challenge the elves, and the attacks weren’t regular. Basically, the elves would beat the crap out of them, and then they’d go back to other necessary work.

“But about a hundred forty years ago, the pope at the time gave orders that a squadron of heroes actually try to defeat the elves.”

They gathered a total of thirty heroes. This was a massive army for the church at the time, considering they had half of the total number of followers of modern times.

“That group of heroes built a small church in front of Cemetarium Forest so they could return to the front lines after resurrecting. They attacked the elves without rest,” said the owner.

“Setting a respawn point in front of your enemy’s base is pretty scummy,” scoffed Shinichi. It utilized the heroes and their resurrection capabilities to their utmost, but it wasn’t the kind of strategy that would sit well with the opposing side. “But since the elves are still here, am I right to assume that failed?”

“Well, it worked out at first…”

Because even if the elves were impressive magic users, there was a limit to their magic. As they kept having to kill the zombified heroes, their magic and physical endurance ground down. They had been driven into a corner, faced with only one option: Abandon their village and flee.

That was when something unusual happened.

“The killed heroes weren’t resurrected,” revealed the owner.

“What?!” Shinichi balked, leaping from his chair in shock. The others opened their eyes wide in surprise.

“I thought the heroes couldn’t die?” exclaimed Rino.

“That’s how it’s supposed to be… Over these ten years, I’ve been killed more than three hundred times by those elves, and I’m still alive!” replied the tavern owner.

“I’m not sure that’s something to brag about…,” said Arian with an uncomfortable smile.

Shinichi was lost in thought next to her. *Meaning resurrection isn't unlimited?*

When Shinichi had tricked an army of ten thousand heroes into thinking they were provided fake blessings by the Evil God, he had said those would only grant them a limited number of resurrections. But maybe he had hit the nail on the head. Maybe there was a limit, even for the real heroes.

But the owner said he's died over three hundred times. Maybe it's not the number of times. What if it's the rate of these resurrections?

For the past ten years, the tavern owner had died every ten days, leaving a decent amount of time before he needed to be resurrected again. But those thirty heroes could have been dying every few minutes—with very little time in between.

Does that mean the Goddess ran out of magic to resurrect the heroes?

After all, even the ocean that appeared infinite to the human eye was measurable. Something unlimited was just not possible in this world. Even if the Goddess Elazonia possessed a lot of magic, the heroes would eventually reach their end.

Huh, it's so obvious. Even if she's a god, we can wear her down if there's a limit to her power. Heh-heh-heh.

"*Someone's in a good mood*," telepathized Celes, guessing Shinichi's thoughts by his evil smile. She was relieved to see it.

Next to her, Rino had a sad expression on her face. "Did the heroes who weren't resurrected die?"

"No, they came back like normal after about a month," answered the tavern owner.

"Oh, I'm so glad," she said with a relieved smile.

When the tavern owner saw that, he somewhat apologetically continued the story. "But while they were gone, the elves angrily destroyed the church and burned down the nearby village the heroes had been using as their base."

"So the villagers got dragged into this mess," said Shinichi.

In a fortunate turn of events, the elves had some sense, sparing the innocent civilians from a brutal massacre. But they did burn down their homes and fields, threatening to kill them next time.

"This town was built by those villagers who escaped. They told the church they would refuse to cooperate with the heroes if this happened again."

The church responded by putting a rule in place that the heroes could only attack the elves once every ten days to avoid angering their settlement.

"I never expected the church would listen to their demands," Shinichi said.

"Well, it was more because their heroes were dead for over a month."

Rumors had spread that the Goddess's wrath had come down on them for wasting the gift of life, or that they were being punished for using the

holy sanctuary of the church for war. All this caused the thirty heroes and the pope to lose their reputations for fighting against the elves.

"The thirty heroes were demoted. Even the pope was forced to step down. Some people said we should stop attacking the Elven Tomb, but there's no way the church could refuse to follow Pope Eument's directives. Fast-forward to now," concluded the tavern owner.

"I feel like it'd be fun to really dig up that dirt," said Shinichi, eyes sparkling as he wondered if there was some dark plot behind the scenes—if someone had instigated the attack knowing it would fail in hopes of stealing the pope's seat.

The tavern owner shook his head with an expression of complete disgust.

"Please. We don't really talk about that here. The church erased it from all records in the Holy City and only tell it to the heroes who've been dispatched here."

"Because it'd tarnish the heroes' reputation," Shinichi finished with an understanding nod. The threat of the undying heroes had let the church grow to where it was now. The church had everything to lose and nothing to gain if people found there was a limit to their resurrections.

"I can't believe that filthy old lady didn't feel the need to tell me something this important," grumbled Shinichi by telepathy.

"*Even if we asked her, I bet she would claim it slipped her mind*," replied Celes with a sigh as she remembered the Holy Mother's mischievous smile.

Either way, the church and the demons had a temporary peace pact in place. If all went well, they could find a way to coexist. Basically, they couldn't simply go around killing the heroes until they couldn't resurrect any longer. It was important information, but it served them no use.

"If the Demon King had been just a little more patient and repeatedly killed Ruzal's party…I wonder if he would have noticed and never have summoned me," said Shinichi.

"I guess that means we should be grateful for His Highness's impatience," replied Celes, tapping her shoe against his like a kiss.

"…Are you flirting with me?"

"*That is for you to figure out*," she replied, trying to keep cool, but her tanned cheeks flushed red.

Shinichi couldn't stop his heart from racing faster.

Arian quickly picked up on the sweet exchange and pinched his side. "Shinichi?"

"What? No, it's nothing! Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

"…Idiot."

"What's going on?" Rino peeped, as Shinichi let out a sudden laugh and Arian pouted.

It wasn't clear whether the tavern owner had noticed their strange interaction, since he just switched to the original topic.

"Anyway, the rule states we can only attack once every ten days, but if Vermeita orders us otherwise… I'll fetch the others to make a party!"

“Hold on. I’d like to make preparations of my own. Let’s push it back to tomorrow,” Shinichi said.

“All righty, then. We’ll do it first thing tomorrow. Boy, am I pumped!” The owner hooted and hollered, struggling to keep a lid on his excitement. He flexed his muscles, bounding out of the tavern.

“What was that about?” asked Shinichi.

“Maybe he’s a war junkie?” suggested Arian.

“But he seems a little different from Daddy…”

Shinichi had a weird hunch about something. But he turned his attention to preparing for tomorrow, giving himself free rein of the kitchen in the tavern without waiting for permission.

It was so early in the morning that the sun had yet to show its face. A cool autumn breeze was blowing. Eleven heroes gathered in front of Cemetarium Forest. There were all types of heroes, from a young warrior gripping his sword to a seasoned magic user. Their varying ages and appearances made them a motley crew. The only common denominator was that every one of them was a powerful man.

“Woot! I can’t take it. Let’s get this show on the road,” said one of the heroes to the owner.

“Chill. It’s no fun playing with the little ladies when they’re still half-asleep.”

“Ha-ha-ha, you’re not wrong.”

The men let out hearty laughs and started to stretch in preparation for the coming challenge. Shinichi’s group watched them from behind a boulder a short range away.

“They seem really ready to go,” Arian noted hopefully.

“Uh-huh…,” said Shinichi, forehead creased. “Isn’t it weird to get so pumped over a losing fight?”

“Is it? I imagine His Highness would be overjoyed at such a battle.” Celes cocked her head to the side.

“That’s just a problem with your standards,” retorted Shinichi.

Even among those with muscles for brains, the Demon King and his wife were probably the only ones so obsessed with battle that when they had no equally strong opponent to challenge them, they became bored with victory to the point that they started to hope for defeat.

“I think most people don’t like actually fighting—but the feeling of winning. They prefer the glory of victory over defeat, right?”

“There isn’t anything wrong with what you’re saying, but I’m not sure I agree…,” said Arian with a strange expression on her face. As a swordswoman, she did understand why someone would hope for a heated battle.

“And if the owner’s been grappling with them for over ten years, he deviates from what’s normal. He’s practically addicted to war,” claimed Celes.

“I guess that’s true. But the other guys seem almost too excited…” Shinichi’s face said he wasn’t entirely convinced.

But there was no real issue if the heroes helped display their opponents’ strength. As Shinichi watched the men, the sun started to peek its face over the horizon.

The owner faced the forest and roared. “Come, elves! Show yourselves! Or we’ll set fire to your beloved forest!”

His voice bounced off the trees. From the shadows of the deep forest came three young girls. Each one of them had porcelain skin and golden hair that sparkled. Their limbs were as long and slender as a model’s, and their faces were so perfect, they could have been chiseled by a master artist. And of course, their long ears ended in sharp points.

“The elves are here!”

The men let out a cry, erupting with suppressed excitement, rushing toward the guardians of the forest who had pummeled them many times over.

“““Oh, please! Bully us to death!!”””

And then the men put their masochistic fetishes on full display to the world.

“….What?”

As Shinichi’s team lost all ability to form words, the elves faced off against the men, each launching off a magic spell with pure disgust in her eyes.

“Come no closer, humans! *Flame Blast!*”

The three elves called forth three huge pillars of fire, engulfing three of the men rushing toward them.

But as their bodies were incinerated by the explosion, the men let out cries of ecstasy.

“Thank you!”

“Oof, your love is so hot!”

“…Ew,” Celes involuntarily scoffed, her gaze frosted over.

But if the men could have heard her insult, they would have taken it as the icing on the cake.

“Today will be the day I’ll finally be kicked with your fair foot!”

“Don’t come near me, pervert! *Suffocate!*”

“Paradise is getting smacked after I suck on your long ears!”

“I’d rather die! *Ice Javelin!*”

Even as their men were killed, the deviants exhibited no fear, rushing into the fire to get taken out by the elves. Only the owner managed to reach one of them. After all, the only reason he worked out was to savor this pain for longer. He fended off the whirlwind of attacks with his steely muscles.

“For ten years, I have yearned for nothing but those long ears. At long last, I get to fulfill my desires… Go on! Pierce my chest with those pointed ears!”

“““What a creep—!”””” spat everyone in Shinichi’s vicinity as the owner spread his arms wide, lunging forward to hug the closest elf.

With a graceful duck, she managed to avoid his embrace, leaping backward into a somersault kick reinforced by magic.

“Get lost, human trash!” As hard as steel, her slender foot aimed for the center of his groin.

“—!!!” He let out a soundless yelp as he was flung high in the sky, looking positively rapturous.

When he crashed to the ground on his head, he took one peaceful breath, even though he must have been in immense pain. Then his body was wrapped in a mysterious light before it disappeared.

“Geez! All humans are the dregs of society!” spat an elf in front of the forest after the heroes had all disappeared.

Even Shinichi and the others couldn’t think of a good retort.

“Are all the heroes perverts…?” he asked hesitantly.

“Well, there was that one bishop who loved underage girls, the Saint who’s bonkers, the Holy Mother who practically salivates over boys in love… And now we have masochistic kinksters with elf fetishes. She’s right. They’re all human trash,” said Celes.

“I-I’m not a pervert!” Arian exclaimed, but Shinichi wasn’t entirely sure. After all, she’d made him lick the scales on her neck, which was close enough to perversion.

Behind him stood Rino, looking confused. “Hey, Shinichi. Why did those heroes seem happy about being killed?”

“Um, let’s see… There are some real weirdos in the world who like to get hurt by the people they love…,” he started, managing to string together a sentence. How awkward was it to have to explain BDSM to an innocent girl?

Rino tilted her head to the side and then gently pinched Shinichi’s arm between her small fingers.

“Did that make you like me?”

“Uh…” Shinichi felt hot under his collar when Rino gazed up at him, seeming more mature than usual.

He quickly gathered himself, smiling in response and patting her head gently.

“You don’t have to do that when I already love you.”

“Really? Yay!” she squealed, hopping in joy without any trace of the flirtatiousness from the moment before.

Shinichi was relieved when Celes silently kicked him in the ass.

“Yow!”

“Do you like how that feels? Sick jerk.”

“What do you want me to do?! Say thank you?”

“If that makes you happy, then I’ll—!” started Arian.

“Stop! Your kicks are no joke!” cried Shinichi, scampering from her as she drew back her leg. She hated being outdone.

They were making such a racket that anyone would have noticed them, even if they didn’t have long ears.

“You, over there! Come out! Stop hiding!” came the angry voice of one of the elves. She yelled she’d blow up the boulder they were hiding behind otherwise.

Shinichi let out a loud laugh. “Heh-heh-heh. I guess you found us.”

“Oh, save us your attempts to look cool,” Celes said as they stepped out.

For a moment, the elves were confused by the makeup of their party. After all, it was rare to see one boy accompanied by three girls, but their faces quickly burned red.

One angrily shouted at them. “I bet you’re another one of those panting perverts, huh? Saying you want to lick us up and down. I’ll *kill* you!”

“Chill out. I’m not *that* into elf ears,” replied Shinichi.

……Pinch. Celes tweaked the skin on his back.

If they weren’t in this situation, he probably would have clarified—“*Not that I* don’t *like elf ears*”—but given the gravity of their circumstances, he pretended not to notice.

The lead elf balled up her fists. “Whatever! You’re still lowlifes planning on destroying our tomb. I’ll murder you!”

“Only capable of thinking of two options, huh?” Shinichi heaved out a sigh, looking at the elf who was cute but psycho.

That said, their reactions weren’t out of place, given their unfortunate interactions with humans until now.

“Let me clear the air. We’re not like those pervs. We came here to talk,” said Shinichi.

““To talk?”” balked the two elves in the back, cautious but interested in Shinichi. He did seem different from the heroes.

But their leader rebuked him, snorting. “Hmph. You think we’d believe anything a human says?”

“Oh, don’t be like that. If you would be so kind as to lend your exquisite ears and listen to the humble request of a wretched human, I would be grateful beyond words.” Shinichi tried to butter them up.

“I suppose, if you’re going to put it like that!” The leader seemed flattered, unclenching her fists.

That was easy, Shinichi thought, offering the wooden box he’d prepared earlier.

“I hope you can accept this as a small apology for the trouble those perverts have caused.”

“An offering? How civilized,” said the lead elf haughtily, accepting the box and removing the lid. Inside was a loaf of bread with a golden crust, wafting with the sweetly sour scent of grapes. “What is it?”

“Pound cake made with the world-famous raisins and grape jam from Uverse.”

The day before, he had made a sample batch for Arian, Celes, and Rino. He could feel them holding back their drool behind him. It was, by all measures, delicious.

The elf's face twisted in disgust at the sight of it. "Right. But how do I know there's not some aphrodisiac in it? Like in erotic novels!"

"I would never! And hold up—there are erotic novels in this world? And you're admitting to *reading* them?!"

"O-o-o-obviously not! There's no way a cultured elf would read crude drivel!" Her cheeks reddened.

Her two companions looked at each other. Their gaze told the whole story—*she* was *reaching puberty*—and no amount of denial would hide the obvious truth.

"Anyway, just try it. If you find it's drugged, you can beat the living shit out of us. Besides, shouldn't you be able to use a simple detoxification spell?" Shinichi pointed out.

"Obviously!" she said, suspiciously sniffing the pound cake before picking it up and taking a bite. She chewed in silence for a while before nodding, apparently impressed by it.

"Huh. The barbarians aren't bad at cooking," she observed honestly, handing the remaining pound cake to her two friends who happily devoured it.

But they didn't seem all that astonished by its taste. Celes, Arian, and Rino let their jaws drop in shock.

"Ludicrous! How can you scarf down that pound cake…?!" exclaimed Celes.

"I can't believe it…," Rino added.

"You should savor it more," warned Arian.

The two demons trembled with fear. Even Arian looked on enviously, fretting that the elves were wasting the treat.

The lead elf saw the girls' reactions and boastfully puffed out her small chest. "Heh, making a big fuss over this shit? Humans are so crude."

"Oh, that's embarrassing." Shinichi flashed her an appeasing smile, but he was running through the possibilities in his mind.

I already knew the demons have the worst taste. But that pound cake was so good, even Arian thought it was a treat. Maybe these elves have really refined palates?

It was strange to think a small settlement of a hundred elves with no capacity for trade would develop a taste for the gourmet.

And she said that they had "novels."

Even in this alternative universe, novels were a thing since ancient times. But with *Copy* spells, there wasn't a need for a good printing press that could handle large volumes, which made novels hard to come by.

Reading was a luxury only accessible to the upper echelon in major metropolises. It wasn't something that farmers in small villages could easily enjoy. The literacy rates in cities were okay, though the same couldn't be

said about the villages. The masses would never learn to read or write, opting to enjoy the oral tales of a passing minstrel instead. This was the main reason the minstrels could influence people.

Based on their reactions, I think it's safe to assume reading is a basic right for elves, and they can even indulge in reading novels.

This was weird, too. It would make sense for cultural developments to abound in the cities, but this was a small settlement tucked away deep in the forest.

What do they know about technology—and science?

He was starting to feel the need to be more cautious. He didn't feel that way when he watched them fend off eleven powerful heroes without breaking a sweat, but he hid his new emotions with a smile.

"Why don't we finally introduce ourselves? My name is Shinichi Sotoyama."

"Ha! You think a dignified elf would give their name to a boorish human?" spat their leader.

"You tell him, Clarissa," one of her friends egged on.

"Wow, Clarissa, you're a role model for all elves," added the other.

"Shut up! Don't tell him!" snapped Clarissa at the friends who had betrayed her.

"*Are all elves brain-dead?*" asked Shinichi telepathically.

"*I have no idea*," replied Celes, glancing away. It seemed she knew she could be dumb sometimes, too.

"Let's cut to the chase. If you agree to our proposal, we'll do something about those perverted heroes," said Shinichi.

"Really?!" cried Clarissa, snapping up the bait Shinichi dangled in front of her.

"Really. It'll be difficult for me to get things to end forever, but I could give you a short break—at least a few months."

At the moment, the Holy Mother basically held the reins for the entire church. If she gave the order, it would be easy to bring down the number of attacks to once a month. If the elf fetishists revolted, the church could haul their bodies away to the far west. As undying heroes, they would obviously resurrect at the nearest church, but it would take them months to travel back from the far end of the continent. And if it really came down to it, Shinichi could find some sadistic dark elves in the demon world and get the heroes obsessed with them instead.

"If you use those months to relocate, you'll never be attacked by the heroes again," suggested Shinichi.

Clarissa's eyebrows shot up. "Excuse me? Why would we have to run from crude humans?!"

"Even with magic, it's difficult to move all our homes and farms…," added one of her companions.

"Besides, we can't leave the tomb," finished the other.

“I see. That’s clearly not an option,” said Shinichi, backtracking even though he was annoyed inside.

It would be easy for us to investigate the Elven Tomb if they just left their village…

There was no way that trick was going to work. After all, the elves had endured the heroes’ attacks for more than two hundred years without ever abandoning the ruins.

But the fact that they value this place so much really makes me want to check it out.

This was the only lead they’d finally managed to find on the Goddess Elazonia. There was no way he was about to let that slip away.

“In that case, I won’t suggest that you move. Well, how about you spend time with us if we fend off the heroes?”

“Meaning…you’re planning on getting us sloshed to sleep with us, huh?! You absolute creep!” shouted Clarissa.

“Is that another nugget of wisdom from your favorite erotic novels?”

“I—I—I said I don’t read them!”

Seeing Clarissa get so worked up made Shinichi want to bully her more, but he managed to control himself.

“I mean, it can range from exchanging books and food to chatting over a cup of tea. Basically, I want us to become friends.”

Based on their conversation, he had no reason to believe the elves would allow them to see the tomb if they asked right away. That’s why he planned on taking small steps to improve their relations before eventually revealing his real goal.

I don’t have a ton of time to waste, but I could mess up if I rush things. Plus, there’s a possibility that I can find the information I need from listening to their stories.

If he could get them to tell him information about the Goddess, he wouldn’t need to set foot in their hallowed tomb. That was his thought process behind this suggestion—it was the most peaceful one—but Clarissa made no attempt to hide her scowl.

“Excuse you? A human could never stand on equal ground and become friends with us. I mean, look at us—beautiful, dignified, strong. You should know your place!”

“You’re so extreme, it’s almost honest.”

“What are you, a masochist?” Celes snapped at him.

But she was staring at the elves, a vein throbbing angrily at her temple.

When he glanced over, he saw Arian looking unhappy with her lips pursed. Even Rino seemed uncomfortable. But Shinichi was more confused than angry.

Yeah, they’re better at magic than humans. Sure, they’re beautiful. Their culture seems more refined, too. I get why they’re arrogant, but this…

Clarissa was unnecessarily cross, yapping her head off like a tiny Pomeranian faced against a larger dog.

Is she afraid of humans? No, that can’t be the case. I bet…

Shinichi pieced together the reason behind this feeling of uncanniness like a puzzle, deciding to change tactics and go on the offensive.

“Are you okay with that?”

“With what?” asked Clarissa.

“Are you really okay with destroying your only opportunity to save your village from destruction?” he replied, completely doing away with his humble manner from before. He opted for a more forceful tone. It wouldn’t have been surprising if the arrogant elves got angry and launched some attack spell at him, but—

“Wh-wh-what are you talking about?!” stammered Clarissa, clearly showing her agitation. The two elves behind her opened their eyes wide in surprise, exchanging uncomfortable glances.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Shinichi had on an evil grin, guessing from their reactions that he was spot-on.

“Ummmm… Can you explain?” asked Rino. She couldn’t really get what he was implying.

Shinichi quietly explained, “Basically, their village is at risk of being destroyed because they don’t have enough men.”

“What?!”

“Tsk…!”

Arian, Celes, and Rino were all stunned, but the elves’ faces twisted in frustration. Shinichi didn’t need any further confirmation; looking at their reaction was enough.

“The question first came to me when I saw you all fending off the perverts: Why weren’t the male elves fighting?”

The owner and the other heroes had completely forgotten about their primary objective of destroying the Elven Tomb. Instead, they kept attacking the elves on a ten-day basis to grapple with beautiful elven women. The elves had been aware of this for a while. There was no other reason to go out of their way to send girls, knowing it’d make them uncomfortable.

“Maybe they were worried that the pervs would kill the male elves in a fit of rage?” asked Celes, on the nose.

“I won’t say that’s not a possibility,” replied Shinichi with a bitter smile.

The only reason the heroes rushed into battle with no changes to their strategy was because they liked getting brutalized by the elven girls. If male elves were sent to the front lines instead, the heroes would get craftier with their methods—setting traps, planning surprise attacks, or otherwise taking advantage of weak points, making them dangerous enemies. In that case, it would make sense for the elves to send in the girls, knowing the heroes would go easy on them. But if the elves were as dignified as Clarissa made them seem, they wouldn’t shoulder the risk of dispatching their girls, knowing there was a one-in-a-million chance of them getting captured and tormented by the humans in the ways of erotic novels.

“And yet, Clarissa’s gang of beautiful girls was sent to fight the heroes. Why? Because there’s barely any men. It’d be a problem if one slipped up and died,” explained Shinichi.

“Uuugh…!” Clarissa gnashed her teeth together—in a way unbefitting a proud elf. Shinichi’s guess seemed to be spot-on.

“But what caused this discrepancy?” asked Arian frankly.

Shinichi thought as he answered carefully. “It could simply be a trend. Boys and girls are generally born at the same rate, but the birth of a boy doesn’t guarantee the next baby is going to be a girl.”

In dense metropolises, it was common for children to be evenly divided between the genders. But this was an elf village with a scant population of one hundred. If they were experiencing problems with declining birth rates or an aging population, they would lack people who are capable of having

children. Say there were fifteen married couples. It wouldn't be strange if the newborns skewed toward girls.

"Either that, or elves have a lower male birth rate."

"…Ack!"

Shinichi observed the elves' faces. All of them glanced away as he spoke.

"Hmm, seems I've hit the nail on the head."

"Is that a thing?" asked Arian in disbelief.

There were species of butterflies and other organisms with extreme male-female imbalances, even though they were rare. The elves weren't human, so it wouldn't be alarming if they possessed similar traits.

"But I imagine you have a bigger problem than this gender thing. It means you're having a hard time conceiving—and therefore having healthy children."

"H-h-how do *you* know?!" stammered Clarissa in shock.

Shinichi hit it on the nose again. He couldn't help laughing at her candid response. "When we used Celes's magic to observe your village yesterday, I thought it was far too small."

The elves had been residing in Cemetarium Forest and guarding the Elven Tomb for at least the past two hundred twenty years, since Pope Eument ordered its destruction. That meant they'd probably lived there ever since the Goddess's religion was born.

"But a population of one hundred is too small for a race with loads of magic and no foreign enemy. Am I wrong?" Shinichi asked.

"You have a point," said Celes.

The elves were powerful enough to heal injuries and cure disease with magic. In a pinch, even the use of *Resurrection* wasn't out of the realm of possibility. After all, they were strong enough to fend off the Goddess's heroes. Anyone would imagine their population and power would explode under these conditions. And yet, they'd remained a small population hidden deep within the forest.

"And the reason behind it all has to be inbreeding depression," said Shinichi.

"What's that?" asked Rino.

"When a group keeps marrying their relatives for generations, it eventually leads to their destruction." He chose his words carefully.

Obviously, there was no way he'd sully her innocence by talking to her about sex and incest.

"All living organisms have dominant genes and recessive genes. Under normal circumstances, only the dominant genes are the ones that make any difference. But when relatives get married, they're more likely to possess the same recessive genes, which means those manifest in the children and… You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"Erm. I really don't understand."

"Let's see. Basically, the couple will be more susceptible to having sick children. That's why it's not the best for immediate family to get married."

“Really?!” Rino gaped at him, but she suddenly seemed relieved.

“What is it?” asked Shinichi, curious about this change.

Rino beamed at him. “I used to wish you were my brother, but now I’m happy that’s not the case.”

“Uh, yeah…” Shinichi turned bright-red. Unconsciously, Rino had essentially proposed to him.

The look in Arian’s and Celes’s eyes seemed sharp enough to kill him.

He rushed back on track. “Anyway, if relatives keep getting married, they’ll only give birth to sickly children, and the race will eventually be destroyed.”

“In other words, the elves are all incestuous perverts,” concluded Celes.

“That’s not true!” cried Clarissa as Celes shot a scornful glare at her.

“Okay, fine. Even you have the decency not to mate with your parents and siblings. But everyone in the village is related, right?” asked Shinichi.

“Aaargh…!” Clarissa didn’t say anything, grinding her teeth, telling Shinichi that he was right yet again.

“I’ve heard the minimum viable population for a given race is around one thousand. Based on the elves’ current population, we can estimate there were only about ten elves when they created this settlement,” he continued.

It would only take four or five generations until everyone in the village was related in some way, making it impossible to avoid those recessive traits. And the fact that the elves tend to bear fewer male children would only accelerate things—forming a single bloodline.

“When that happens to human settlements, it’s common practice to invite in people from outside of the village and try to get new blood. But elves haven’t done that for more than two hundred years. Well, I suppose it’s more correct to say they *couldn’t*.”

If he was to believe the minstrel and peddler, there were almost certainly no elves other than the ones in Cemetarium Forest. Even if they wanted to welcome new brides and grooms into their clan, they wouldn’t be able to find them.

“Things would have been better if you had mixed it with human blood. But the situation with the church made it difficult to engage with humans in any real way. That meant you were slowly heading toward a degraded gene pool,” he concluded.

Clarissa flushed red with shame and humiliation. “I—I—I would rather bite off my own tongue and bleed to death than get impregnated by a barbarian!”

“Hold off on the erotic novels, would you?” snapped Shinichi in frustration.

Her line made her sound like a heroine on the verge of giving in to carnal temptation.

It’s like she understands their situation, but she can’t convince herself yet.

Shinichi was starting to think Clarissa's bravado and yammering that elves were superior was her attempt to conceal her fear of impending doom. He began to feel a little sorry for her.

But what should I do…?

The elves were determined to push the humans away. His initial plan to slowly build an amicable relationship was close to impossible.

"…I have no other choice. Let's risk it. Celes," he said.

"Yes," she replied, immediately understanding his plans. She dissolved the *Illusion* that covered her.

When they saw her dark, pointed ears, Clarissa and her friends let out a shriek.

"You're an elf?!"

"We're not the only ones?!"

They had believed there were no others outside of their small village. The sight of Celes came as an incredible surprise—and a beacon of hope for their salvation.

"As you can see, there are others. Obviously, this includes men… Erm, there *are* men, right?" Shinichi asked Celes.

"Yes. I am the only elf to come to the surface, though."

"Meaning we're prepared to introduce you to some real studs."

"Meaning I don't have to beg that idiot on my knees to get him to sleep with me? He's the only young guy—and he's so full of himself!" shouted one of the elves.

"Meaning I don't have to screw that old geezer who already has a wife and kids? He's thirty years my senior, and I only did it because we're not closely related!" exclaimed the other, tears in her eyes.

"…Yes, it'll be all right," said Shinichi, gripping his temple at the pathetic sight. Then he looked up at Clarissa. "I assume you'll be forced to marry someone, too. If that's—"

"…I won't," she said.

"What?"

"I said, I don't have a boyfriend or a fiancé or anything!" she screamed, teary-eyed.

"What do you mean?" asked Shinichi.

Clarissa's two companions answered for her awkwardly.

"There isn't anyone who's distant enough in blood…"

"Who she's with isn't even an issue. And since everyone is out of the question…"

"Ah, it's gotten that bad, huh?" said Shinichi.

They had reached the final stages when the diversity in the gene pool had really shrunk. With the low birth rate of men, there were few bachelors available. Unfortunately, that meant she was at high risk of marrying a direct relative. Even though it was a tiny village that desperately wanted to increase its population, all the men turned her down because they didn't want to have unhealthy children.

“D-d-don’t get it twisted! They didn’t reject me! *I* rejected *them*!” Clarissa boasted.

“Playing hard to get won’t help your situation…,” said Shinichi.

From her tears, everyone could see she was putting on an act, but she kept on insisting.

“Obviously, men are all over me! After all, I’ve been put in charge of the super-important job of protecting the village from the pervs! What’s not to like?”

“Don’t you think that was kinda like getting you out of the way?” asked Shinichi.

Clarissa’s knees suddenly buckled. “Fine! I get it! I’m just totally undesirable…”

“That was too easy!” shouted Shinichi in surprise.

Her friends crouched next to Clarissa as she wept and wrapped her in a group hug.

“Clarissa, there’s no way that’s true!”

“Yeah, don’t listen to this nasty human.”

“This is why I hate dirty creeps,” Celes chimed in, joining forces with the light elves.

“Um, Celes… Could you please not take their side?” Shinichi jokingly asked, but he still felt bad for hurting Clarissa. “You’ve dealt with your own share of problems, huh?”

He guessed her only support system came from her parents and these two friends. All the rest must have ignored her, for she served them no purpose. Even then, she never gave in to her despair, continuing to fight for the safety of the village. Her resilience should have been praised. Shinichi felt sorry for her and tried to pat her on the back in encouragement, but she instantly smacked his hand away.

“I don’t need your pity, you piece of shit!”

“Take it easy. I’ll set you up with a nice elf boy. Okay?”

“I don’t need someone like that!” She kept denying his goodwill, even to the point where it hurt her. Then she suddenly pointed at Celes. “Besides, that elf with the dark skin is clearly not the same as us!”

“…Tsk.” Shinichi clicked his tongue that she would notice something so insignificant, but he smiled nonetheless, making excuses. “That’s not true. Celes is just a little tan from the sun.”

“…Heal all wounds, *Full Healing*,” said Clarissa with suspicion in her eyes. Since a suntan was technically a type of burn, it was possible to heal it with magic.

But Celes’s dark skin was genetic, so obviously, it didn’t change anything.

“Liar!” shrieked Clarissa.

“Ugh. Why did your brain cells have to come together *now*?” Shinichi groaned. He didn’t even attempt to hide his contempt from Clarissa.

“You’re an elf with dark skin, huh? I just remembered something! I read about your kind in books—all about the legendary dark elves!”

“I knew you’d know something about them…,” said Shinichi.

The dark elves were among the demons that the church was hell-bent on destroying. It wasn’t strange for the light elves, who were their close relatives, to be aware of their existence. And as far as Shinichi was aware, relations between the light elves and dark elves weren’t great, which was why he had hidden her identity at first. There was no way to stop it from eventually coming out, though.

“You’re right,” admitted Shinichi. “She’s a dark elf and—”

“I bet she’s a smutty pervert!” shouted Clarissa.

“A smutty…pervert?!” parroted Shinichi, shocked by the unexpected phrase.

“A *what*?!” said Arian with wide eyes.

They were all shocked.

Clarissa must have mistaken their reaction as confirmation that she was correct because she puffed up her flat chest in pride.

“From the moment I saw your excessively fat rack, I was jealo— I mean, I *knew* you were a degenerate!”

“The bigger the boobs, the bigger the idiot! Why can’t boys just understand?” said one of her friends.

“That’s all to say we’re *proud* of our flat racks! They’re practically proof we’re noble elves!” cried the other.

“No need to cry over it,” consoled Shinichi as the three elves pitifully bragged about their flat chests.

“Anyway, we don’t want anything to do with a dirty dark elf! I bet all your men are worthless lowlifes who’ll sell us to a brothel after they’re done defiling us! Like in erotic novels!”

“Does everything you know come from porn?!” jabbed Shinichi, but Clarissa’s raunchy brain was too full of sexual fantasies for her to notice.

“Shut up! Shut *up*! Shoo! Go home and suck on the tits of your dark elf—or whatever! You’re nothing but a boobs man!”

“How did you know?! I mean, that’s not relevant right now!” barked Shinichi, suddenly nervous. Arian shot him a sad glare.

As for Celes, who bore the brunt of everyone’s jokes—

“O Black Dragon, controlling the ground below, grant me…” She started to recite the incantation for her most powerful spell, expressionless as she was beyond rage.

“Celes, I know how you feel, but please calm down!” said Shinichi.

“I knew it; you were lying when you said you wanted to be friends!” shouted Clarissa.

“This is all your fault!” shot back Shinichi. He looked at Clarissa who was completely unaware of her own hand in this. She was now starting to recite her own incantation for an attack spell. He picked up Celes against her will, turned tail, and sprinted.

As they were running away, the other two elves shouted out after them.

“Wait, I’m fine with dark elves!”

“If he’s hot and tall and loves to do chores!”

“Shut up!” shouted Shinichi in return, feeling more annoyed than ever at the pushy elves. He focused all his energy into running far away from that place.

When Shinichi’s group reached Oriens after leaving Cemetarium Forest, they headed straight to the tavern.

“Man, today was amazing—from their frosty glares to their relentless attacks! All this was possible because the Goddess Elazonia blessed me with this undying body so I can really savor the pain!” said the tavern owner.

“Save her praise for another time. Later.” Shinichi shook off the masochistic owner. The group headed up to their room on the second floor, locked the door behind them, and finally had a chance to take a breath.

“Seriously… Who would’ve thought the elves would be arrogant, depraved, *and* stupid…?” said Shinichi.

“Ha-ha, what if we let the Evil God take care of them?” asked Celes, grinning from ear to ear.

“Celes, you’re acting scary…,” Rino said meekly as the maid emanated a black vibe.

“What do we do now?” asked Arian.

Shinichi grimaced. “One thing is for sure: We’ve burned all bridges of communication.”

“But they did seem really into the idea of dark elf men.”

“Yeah, we could use that as a bargaining chip. If we’re very patient, they might eventually let us search the tomb, but…I’m not sure if I can keep my cool the whole time.” Shinichi sighed.

“Uh, yeah, that’s true.” Even Arian couldn’t deny that. If they kept heckling her—or Shinichi—for being human, she couldn’t say she wouldn’t draw her blade against them.

“Besides, we don’t have the time to convince those totally senseless idiots,” he continued.

It had already been over a month since they’d left the Demon King’s castle on a mission to reveal the Goddess Elazonia’s identity, since they had focused on spreading rumors and lies about the Evil God along the way. They would be able to keep the cease-fire with the church going longer. It was more a question about how much longer the Demon King could go without seeing his beloved daughter.

“We’ve made sure to teleport back to him every five days, but he’s been looking worse and worse every time,” said Shinichi.

“He won’t last more than another month,” guessed Arian.

They all sighed, remembering the state of the helicopter parent, wasting away to nothing but skin and bones.

“We could expedite things if we resorted to using violence…,” Shinichi noted.

“His Highness would be happy to wipe them out. We need only ask,” suggested Celes.

“Were you that offended when they called you lewd?” asked Shinichi.

It seemed quite the sore spot for her. He held out a piece of candy he’d made just for these situations.

“You’re sorely mistaken if you think you can placate me with sweets,” she said, popping the candy in her mouth.

“I love when you’re honest and eager about eating candy.”

“Shinichi, I’m craving something sweet!” Arian cried.

“Me too!” piped in Rino.

“All right. Don’t worry. There’s plenty to go around,” said Shinichi with a crooked smile as he handed candy to Arian and Rino, who were both jealous. “Even if His Highness were to go up against a hundred elves, he wouldn’t lose. But it would be difficult to avoid killing them.”

This was different from the time when he was up against the troops of Boar Kingdom. If the Demon King left the elven bodies in a condition where they could be resurrected, the other elves could just bring them back to life. Of course, they couldn’t execute a “zombie attack” as well as the heroes. But it would be hard for even the Demon King to exercise control against the powerful enemy.

“The elves have potty mouths, but I don’t think they’re bad. I’m sad they don’t have any boys, and I don’t want you to do anything terrible to them…,” explained Rino.

“Don’t worry. We won’t go around killing each other,” assured Shinichi with a nod and a smile.

Rino would always be far too kind of a person.

“Besides,” he continued, “those pervs would be angry if we destroyed their precious elves.”

“Very true,” agreed Celes, holding back her anger as she imagined the humans, stripped from their reason to live, charging into the demon world in search of dark elves.

“Okay. Negotiating is out of the question. So is the use of force. That leaves us with only one option.” The corners of his mouth curled up in a smile. Arian and the girls were aware that meant he was brewing up some dirty scheme.

“What did you think of this time?” asked Arian.

“Do you know what kind of people are the easiest to fool?” Shinichi responded with a question of his own.

“Uh… Stupid people?” she replied hesitantly, caught off guard.

Shinichi’s smile got even more sinister as he shook his head. “Unfortunately, the answer is actually ‘intellectuals.’”

“Really—?!”Arian balked in surprise as Shinichi patted her on the shoulder before standing up.

“All right. Let’s get ready. I’ll prove it to you.” He used *Search* to extract the necessary information from his brain, then walked out of the room.

It took them a whole day to finish their preparations. Shinichi returned to Cemetarium Forest with Arian and Rino.

“Rino, could you use magic to amplify our conversation to all the elves deep in the forest?” asked Shinichi.

“Yes, I’ll try,” she replied, nodding before closing her eyes and concentrating. “Can I get your attention, please? *Wide Link.*”

Everything that entered Rino’s ears was transmitted to Cemetarium Forest like a radio broadcast. This way, even if the elves retreated, they would hear the entire conversation.

“All right, let’s go.” Shinichi took a deep breath, readied himself, and shouted toward the forest. “Hey, elves! Abandon your village and leave Cemetarium Forest now—or face a dangerous catastrophe!”

He repeated the message to smooth over any misunderstandings. The three elves from the day before came flying out of the forest.

“What do you think you’re doing, creep?!” shouted Clarissa.

“I already told you: My name is Shinichi Sotoyama, Clarissa.”

“Don’t call me by name!” She was as annoying as always.

Shinichi repeated his demands, irritated already. “Like I said, abandon your village and leave the forest…or face your worst nightmare.”

“Ha! Like a pathetic human could do anything to the glorious elves.”

“So you’re saying you won’t negotiate.”

“We were never going to compromise with humans. Got it? Just tell us where the dark elves are and get lost!”

“You’re practically begging to be reunited with us!” He was starting to get a splitting headache. Shinichi sent a telepathic message up into the sky: “*Celes, let’s do this*.”

“Understood.”

Before this had started, the dark elf had flown above the clouds, hovering six miles up in the air. Shinichi had explained she would need to use magic to compensate for the decreased oxygen levels and to maintain her body temperature. That was to say, she was expending magic quicker than she would on the ground, and he didn’t want her to have to stay up there for too long.

“Confirming target.” Celes cast *Telescope* to look down at the Earth, locating the elves’ village. She cast her next spell so it wouldn’t fall directly on the settlement.

“Apport.”

In front of her appeared a giant stone pillar, three times longer than she was tall. Gravity pulled it down, and it crashed in the forest near the village. Rino used *Protection* to strengthen the pillar to prevent it from breaking on impact. Instead, it kicked up sand and dirt as it pierced the ground with a thunderous clash.

“Wh-wh-what was that?!” stammered Clarissa.

“We launched a pillar of environmental hormones near your village,” explained Shinichi as Clarissa panicked. A moment later, a second and third pillar crashed into the forest, spraying dirt over their surroundings.

“Environmental hormones?” she asked.

“That’s not the scientific term. The correct phrase is *endocrine disruptor*… But there’s no way an intelligent elf wouldn’t know about that, right?”

Clarissa broke into a cold sweat at being asked this and avoided making eye contact.

“O-o-of course I know! See, it’s a…bad substance that messes with your body?”

“Exactly. It’s a very dangerous substance that disrupts the effects of hormones, which are necessary for normalizing the body of a living creature.”

“See? We would obviously know about environmental hormones—Wait! A dangerous substance?!” cried Clarissa, letting out a shriek after getting carried away with pride.

Observing her was Shinichi with his usual smirk.

“And I used the worst poison from among all environmental hormones: dioxin.”

“Dioxin…,” repeated Clarissa with a gulp.

She didn’t know what it was. What stood in front of her was a human who had more knowledge than the elves. He was confident enough in his assertions that she believed it was a terrible poison.

“Organisms exposed to dioxin experience a severe disruption of their hormones. Early symptoms are hair loss and extreme weight gain. In essence, they become bald fatties.”

“Aaah!” screamed Clarissa and her two friends. Elves took great pride in their appearance. Losing control of it was a terrifying prospect to them.

“But that’s not the worst effect. You’re at a higher risk for cancer. The efficiency of the immune system diminishes, making the affected contract diseases more easily. And…it decreases the fertility of the population, resulting in a lower birth rate—and the babies are rarely born healthy,” concluded Shinichi. It was literally a death sentence to the elves, who were already teetering on the edge of destruction. “There’s enough dioxin that the pollutants will reach here quickly. You three should run.”

“You’re inhuman!”

“I thought I was a crude one?”

“That’s not what I meant!” shouted Clarissa as Shinichi played dumb. Her face turned pale. Her two elven companions were shaking in terror.

“This is bad! We have no choice! We have to abandon the village!” cried one.

“No! If we do, he wins!” snapped back Clarissa, more terrified of losing to a human than of the dioxin. She planted her unsteady feet. “B-b-besides, it’s all a bluff! I won’t be fooled!”

“Heh-heh-heh, then why don’t you just use *Liar Detector*?” Shinichi provoked.

“Uh…”

“What? Can’t you use magic to detect lies?”

“Of course I can!” yelled Clarissa, immediately casting the spell. “My ears will not allow any deceit. *Liar Detector*.”

That particular magic sharpened her senses, allowing her to detect slight tremors in the voice, increased body temperature, and other factors associated with lies. Shinichi watched until she had completed the spell before repeating himself.

“Dioxin is a dangerous poison that deals massive damage to an organism’s health and introduces abnormalities into their fertility rates. We have put dioxin on those pillars and shot them into the ground near the elven village.”

“…It’s…true?” whimpered Clarissa in surprise. Her *Liar Detector* hadn’t detected anything—proof that Shinichi wasn’t lying.

“Told ya.” Shinichi showed her a sad and compassionate expression, even though he practically felt like sticking his tongue out and laughing at them. In fact, he hadn’t told any lies, but he hadn’t expressed the full truth either.

It’s true that dioxin is a deadly poison. Agent Orange, an herbicide and defoliant used by the United States during the Vietnam War, contained a type of dioxin.

It was a terrifying chemical weapon—a thousand times more toxic than cyanide. Masses of people still suffered from the consequences.

But I never said I used that kind!

The word *dioxin* covered a group of over two hundred substances. Not all of them were toxic enough to be used as defoliants. Shinichi had made this substance by burning one of the few things he’d brought with him from Earth—the vinyl chloride in his smartphone strap. It wasn’t very toxic to humans, and there wasn’t enough of it to have any negative effects.

When I said we “put dioxin on those pillars,” I never said we applied enough to risk their lives. Technically, I never lied.

The elves listened to his explanation and made the assumption themselves that it was dangerous.

Plus, dioxin usually only has negative effects if ingested. Driving those pillars into the Earth wouldn’t result in any immediate damage to health.

Yet, the elves mistook his meaning again, assuming the dioxin was like a curse they could never escape.

Well, I might have provoked their fear. But I never lied.

Before this, he had confirmed through tests with Celes that *Liar Detector* can find lies, but it couldn't guarantee that what the speaker said was the truth. The elves were unaware of that fact. They blindly believed in the power of their magic. And that brought their downfall.

And their advanced knowledge and wisdom was just enough for them to understand chemistry—but to a limited extent.

A completely ignorant person would have deflected: "Well, *I've* never heard of dioxin" or "There's no way that could be real."

"To think they were deceived by a lowly human because they're such clever elves! Heh-heh-heh!"

"*You're the worst man I've ever met,*" Celes said from the sky, but Shinichi ignored her as he gazed at Clarissa and her friends before putting the final nail in their coffin.

"Look, you should run away as fast as you can—or you'll turn out like *this*." He gripped a bunch of his own black hair with his right hand and yanked it off. The wig had hidden a shiny bald head caused by dioxin poisoning (which was what he wanted them to believe, but he'd really just shaved it).

"""Aaaaaaaaahhh—!""" shrieked the three elves, dashing away with Cemetarium Forest behind them. Listening closely, Shinichi could hear the cries of the other elves deeper in the village. It sounded like they were abandoning the settlement, running for their lives.

"That's enough, Rino," Shinichi called out.

"All righty." She cut off the *Wide Link* before tugging on Shinichi's sleeve, asking him to bend over. "I'll heal your hair."

"Thanks. It's surprisingly cold."

"But I think it's kind of cute. You look like Daddy."

Shinichi ran his hand over his smooth head with a pained smile. Rino beamed, holding her hands up and reciting the incantation.

"Make it nice and fluffy again. *Full Healing.*"

Her power showered his head, speeding the growth of the follicles so the hairs grew faster.

"Magic is so convenient. You never need to worry if you get a terrible haircut," said Shinichi.

"Which is why you didn't hesitate to shave off all your hair, but I don't know about this…" Arian sighed, both relieved to see Shinichi back to his normal hair and exasperated at him. She glanced in the direction the elves ran. "You lie as well as the Evil God."

"That's an insult. To the Evil God." Celes was disgusted, agreeing with Arian as she touched down to the ground.

"Hey, I achieved our goals without hurting anyone. You should be thanking this gentle liar."

“I have reason to believe you’ve given the elves some serious psychological scars,” she shot back.

Shinichi gave himself a pat on the back, completely ignoring her, and just started walking toward the elves’ village.

Intermission
A Day in the Life of the Saint

Located in the northern region of Uropeh, a small village with no more than three hundred residents was at the brink of destruction by a single monster.

The villagers cowered in their homes as they watched the massive boar, as big as a shed, dig up and eat the seed potatoes that had just been planted. It was heavier than an elephant but ran as fast as a horse; people were mere mincemeat before it.

One boy had actually managed to run to a neighboring village to bring back two of the Goddess's heroes, but the warrior's sword had shattered against the boar's sharp tusks, and the priest's *Force* spell had bounced off its bulky flesh before it trampled the two to death. The heroes were immediately resurrected at the village's church, but they ran away from the village, claiming they were going to call for reinforcements.

"We're done for! It'll finish off the potatoes soon, and then it'll eat *us*!" cried a villager.

"Please save us, Goddess!" prayed another, trembling in fear at their impending doom. That's when the unexpected happened.

"Brilliant white, pure and holy lightning, pierce my enemies. *Call Lightning*," said a gentle voice, and a bolt of lightning rained down from the heavens, striking the monstrous boar.

"Graaaar—!"

Even the mountain of flesh wasn't enough to defend against the electrical shock. Its organs and brain were fried. A black smoke rose from its charred body as it fell over in the fields and moved no more.

"What was that…?"

The villagers were frozen in place, too shocked by the turn of events to be happy. They watched as a single girl floated down gently from the sky. With soft porcelain skin, jade-colored eyes, and long golden hair that sparkled under the sun, she was beautiful enough to be mistaken for the Goddess Elazonia herself. It was Saint Sanctina who smiled kindly at the villagers who peeked out at her from the cracks between their shutters.

"You are all safe now," she announced.

"""Whoooo!""" The people let out cheers of joy, bounding out from their homes, surrounding Sanctina as they showered her with words of gratitude.

"Thank you so much, Lady Saint!"

"I thought we were going to die…"

"Goddess Elazonia has protected us!" cried one woman.

With a smile on her face, Sanctina firmly but gently denied the statement. "That is incorrect."

"Huh?"

"I am no longer a follower of Elazonia—for she brings suffering to the people. I am a devout follower of the Goddess Rino."

“Uh-huh…”

The villagers were confused at the mention of this new goddess. Taking advantage of the sudden lull, the elderly village chief stepped forward.

“Lady Saint, we are incredibly grateful to you for saving our small village. But with our fields and crops having been destroyed, we have no money to offer you as—”

“That is unnecessary,” interrupted Sanctina with a benevolent smile.

“What?”

“Goddess Rino teaches us that love is free. My acts of service are a manifestation of her love that she bestows upon those who suffer. There is no need for you to overexert yourselves just to thank me.”

“B-but…”

“The greatest reward would be to see the village rebuilt and all its residents happy.”

“O-ohhh…!”

She had cast aside her own desires, putting everyone else first. She had a heart of selfless love. Sanctina might as well have had a halo emblazoned above her head. Along with all the villagers, the chief cried tears of joy, falling to his knees.

“Please raise your heads. I am simply following her teachings. I am not worthy of your worship,” said Sanctina.

“That’s not true. There’s no one in this world as kind as you!”

“You’re nothing like those greedy priests from the church!”

“I am honored. But the Goddess Rino is the one who taught me to love. Please offer your thanks to her.”

Then Sanctina cast *Illusion*: The image of a beautiful girl floated down from above. Long black hair cascaded down her small back, where pure white wings sprouted. It was an image of Rino—archangel, Diva, and Goddess. Sanctina’s mind projected her with an almost exaggerated beauty.

“This is the loving Goddess Rino…,” she announced.

“She’s so cute and divine!” cried one of the villagers, and they prostrated themselves on the ground again.

An evil smile flashed across Sanctina’s face: *Everything is going to plan*, it seemed to say, but she quickly hid it before gently calling out to the new followers.

“Let us all praise the Goddess Rino. Love is free.”

“““Love is free!”””” cried the villagers.

“Love is blind to age, gender, and race.”

“““Love is blind to age, gender, and race!””””

And how wonderful was it to love all without discrimination! Their faith in the Goddess Rino deepened. They had no idea it included the wicked desires of a pedophile who wanted nothing more than to become one with a little demon girl.

“Love is everything. Cuteness is justice!”

“““Love is everything. Cuteness is justice!””””

Sanctina’s leading of the chants swept the villagers into this new faith. For a religion to spread, it obviously needed something to worship and captivating teachings. On top of that, it needed zealous missionaries who others could admire. They would even go as far as to sacrifice themselves to appear admirable.

The creepy zealot by the name of Saint Sanctina was sure to spread faith in the Goddess Rino across the world.

Chapter 2
Dark Depths

Celes used *Fly* to carry Shinichi's group over the dense forest, touching down in the expansive fields around the elves' village.

"Still no rice, huh? I was hoping the elves would have it…," Shinichi lamented as he gazed at the fields where ears of wheat moved unnaturally.

"Someone's there!" warned Arian, immediately drawing her sword, but what appeared in front of them was not an elf who'd been slow to run away—but a humanoid figure made of wood.

"A moving doll…," started Shinichi.

"A golem," clarified Celes, shoulders relaxing as she lost interest. It might have been made with different materials from the golem for Rino's performances or their touring show, but the magic was the same.

The golem didn't seem to pay any mind to the group. It just continued swinging a scythe, harvesting the wheat. It could work like a person, but it didn't have the intelligence to identify intruders nor the combat skills necessary to do something about them. It merely followed a preset list of actions.

"Automation through mechanization? Huh. This would give them time to write and enjoy novels," noted Shinichi.

They just needed to use magic for the golem to move. It could handle the farming on its own. The elves possessed so much magic that they could work essentially part-time and take it easy.

"And they're arrogant because they've never known a hard day's work."

Hardships were necessary for growth. But everyone wanted to live an easy life if it was possible.

The world is so difficult, Shinichi thought.

They headed toward the center of the village where the actual houses were gathered.

"These are really strange," said Arian.

"They appear to be massive slabs of stone," added Celes.

The girls looked curiously at the elves' strange houses made of gray rectangular walls with cut-out doors and windows. Shinichi, however, placed a hand on one of the walls that had no sign of joins between pieces, deep wrinkles on his brow.

"No way. Is this concrete?"

This material would be completely foreign to those of this world, but Shinichi was used to seeing concrete in architecture on Earth.

"I know concrete was used in ancient Rome, and it's really not that hard to make, but…"

In every human city they'd visited so far—from Boar Kingdom to Tigris—all the buildings were made of stone, brick, or wood. He hadn't seen a

single sign of concrete. But for some reason, the elves had made concrete walls with more precision than any in twenty-first-century Japan.

"……"

"Shinichi?" asked Arian.

"It's nothing. We need to find the tomb," replied Shinichi with a smile as he brushed off her concerns, setting off to look for their target.

They spent about an hour making a lap around the whole village, but they weren't able to locate anything that resembled a tomb.

"What do we do? I didn't think it'd be in the middle of the village, but there don't seem to be any roads leading to it," said Shinichi.

"And no signs, which is incredibly unhelpful." Celes sighed, only half-joking.

Shinichi stood there scratching his head, at a loss. "You didn't see anything that could have been the ruins when you observed from above, right?"

"Just the village and lots of trees."

Other than the pyramids, it was relatively normal for tombs to be underground. The entrance on the surface could be small and easily hidden in the forest.

"Shall I fly in the sky and look one more time with *Clairvoyance*?"

"No. I get the feeling we won't be able to find it from above. It could be camouflaged," replied Shinichi. If they covered the entrance with dirt and planted trees around its perimeter, it'd be impossible to find it, even with the use of *Clairvoyance*. "Besides, you've already used a lot of magic today. I'm sure you're tired. I don't want to push you too hard."

"Understood." Celes dropped the suggestion when Shinichi seemed concerned for her health. "How should we search for it, then?"

"There's no point in wandering aimlessly around the forest. I guess we can start with searching the elves' houses," replied Shinichi. It'd be wonderful if they managed to find a map with the location of the tomb, but he guessed they shared its location only through word of mouth since they went to so much trouble to hide it. "I really messed up. I should have kept at least one elf to torture and get the location from."

"Shinichi," Rino warned. "You can't do anything terrible." She had on a wry smile, preventing Shinichi from following through on his joke.

Nearby, Celes's long ears perked up. "Lady Arian."

"Yeah, I know." Arian had on a stern expression.

Celes picked up a stone by her feet and chucked it toward the expansive wheat field on her right.

"Hmm…? What are you doing?" asked Shinichi, watching the stone as it arced through the air. He looked back at the two and noticed Arian had disappeared. A moment later, he heard a shriek he didn't recognize from behind a nearby tree.

"Ah! Aaah?!"

"Don't move! Unless you want me to break your arm," barked Arian.

“Someone was following us?!” asked Shinichi in surprise, finally picking up on the situation. Celes had thrown the rock to draw the person’s attention, and Arian had used the moment to sneak quietly up and capture them.

“It’d be super-convenient if that’s an elf who didn’t run away,” offered Shinichi.

“That doesn’t seem to be the case,” said Arian as she dragged the person back.

In front of Shinichi and his crew, Arian ripped the hat off their stalker—revealing a baby-faced girl with glasses and ears of standard length.

“Who are you?”

Trembling with fear, the stalker managed to name herself. “I-I’m Fey. An explorer.”

“An explorer… Does that mean you’re trying to find the Elven Tomb?”

“Y-yes.”

Shinichi exchanged a glance with Arian and indicated she could release the girl, Fey, since she didn’t look like she would attack them.

“Sorry for hurting you,” said Arian.

“N-no. I’m okay.” Fey let out a sigh of relief.

Shinichi eyed her suspiciously. “You know, I’ve never heard of someone working as an explorer.” He’d traveled all over the continent talking to people but had never once heard of someone who identified as one, nor had he heard of any ruins or caves actually worth exploring. The Elven Tomb was the only one that came to mind, so it didn’t seem like someone could make a living this way.

Fey hung her head, looking away. “A-actually, I call myself an explorer, but this is my first expedition…”

“Oh, I see,” said Shinichi. Inspecting her closely, he noticed her clothes weren’t very worn or dirty. He couldn’t see any scars on her arms, legs, or face that would indicate she’d been on any daring adventures. Maybe she really was a newbie explorer. “You’re from some well-to-do family, aren’t you?”

“H-how’d you know?!” cried Fey, caught off guard by the question.

“You’re really not perceptive for an explorer,” said Shinichi in exasperation.

Rino tugged on his sleeve with a confused expression. “Shinichi, how’d you know she’s from a nice family?”

“Simple. Her hands are unblemished—no cracks, no calluses. Those are the hands of someone who’s never seen a hard day’s work.” Shinichi looked at Arian’s hands.

“It’s not really something I want other people to see,” she said, mouth twisted unhappily as she took off her gloves and showed them her palms. They were covered in calluses from millions of practice swings. They went so deep, no healing magic could ever remove them.

“Oooh, those are the hands of someone who works hard,” said Rino.

“Yeah. Okay. That’s enough,” said Arian, embarrassed as Rino held out her fair hands in comparison. She yanked her gloves back on. Shinichi watched with a pained smile.

“I like your hands, Arian. They’re cool. The calluses speak to all those you’ve saved.”

“…‘Cool’ isn’t a compliment to a girl.” She adjusted her gloves, cheeks tinged pink like she wasn’t entirely unhappy with the comment.

Rino watched them enviously and took Celes’s hands. “Your hands have scars, too.”

“Those are from…,” started Celes, but she couldn’t tell Rino they were old wounds from her time as a slave before Rino’s mother saved her. She couldn’t find the words to finish.

But Rino guessed that Celes had worked hard, glancing at her own hands again with slumped shoulders. “I’m the only one with smooth skin…”

It was proof of her father’s devotion and the love of all the other people around her. It wasn’t something she should be ashamed of, but it did make her feel some type of way.

I messed up... Shinichi instantly regretted his poor word choice. He tried to think of something to say to make her feel better, but before he could, Fey rushed up to Rino and enveloped her hands in her own.

“D-don’t worry about it. You’re still a child! It’s normal for children to have soft hands.”

“…Really?”

“R-really. L-look at mine! My hands are as soft as a baby’s, even at my age! Ha-ha…” Fey had intended to cheer Rino up, but it had backfired. She hung her head glumly.

Shinichi smiled painfully at her, stroking Rino’s head gently. “She’s right. You don’t need to feel bad. You have plenty of time to work hard. Besides, you’ve already done so much.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t you remember? You practiced those songs and dances, and you healed a bunch of people.” Shinichi knelt down and squeezed Rino’s hands that had brought smiles to the people.

“Oh…,” said Rino in surprise. She had enjoyed the singing and dancing, and she had been so happy about healing people that she’d never considered it work.

“The people of Tigris and even Sanctina were saved by you. Even now, minstrels are playing your songs, making people happy,” continued Shinichi. And there were the fanatics obsessing over the Goddess Rino, but he intentionally skirted that topic. “It doesn’t matter what they look like. I love your hands because they’re kind and bring joy to everyone.”

“…Yay!” cried Rino happily, tears in the corners of her eyes as she hugged Shinichi.

The two girls with scars and calluses kicked him from behind as they sulked, but Shinichi endured the punishment without complaint.

“S-so I’m the only one who’s never worked hard or helped anyone…,” Fey trailed off sadly.

“Uh, well…good luck,” said Shinichi, unable to think of anything else to say.

She doesn’t seem like a bad person. Assuming everything she’s told us is true.

He didn’t think she was a good enough actress to cry on demand and pull off this act. He did feel for her, but he wasn’t ready to let his guard down, so he went back to his interrogation.

“And? Why would a lady start exploring?”

“I-it’s a little embarrassing, but I’ve never really been away from home. I really like to read stories about adventures, and I always wanted to be an explorer who seeks hidden ruins and things…”

“Fiction strikes again…” Shinichi sighed, having just chased off the lewd elf who’d been knee-deep in her erotic novels.

On the other hand, Rino seemed to have something in common with the girl. Her eyes sparkled with excitement. “I know how you feel! I really wanted to go out on an adventure by myself after reading a story about it.”

“Well, I guess I can understand the feeling,” said Shinichi.

“When I said I wanted to adventure on my own, Daddy dug me a labyrinth to explore.”

“That is a bit extreme,” said Shinichi. Only the Blue Demon King would create a labyrinth for his daughter because he was afraid she would leave the house in a fit. “Oh yeah, he did dig the cave for us where Arian got her magic sword.”

“Yep,” she said with a wistful smile as she fondled the handle of the magic sword strapped to her hip. After she had become friends with Shinichi, he had told her the whole thing had been a setup. Nowadays, she considered it a good memory since it was the reason he discovered she was a half dragon.

Fey’s eyes were wide as she watched them. “D-dig a cave?”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it. More importantly, why would a first-time explorer come to find the Elven Tomb?” Shinichi forced the conversation back on topic, avoiding a lengthy discussion about the cave with Fey. “If the elves caught you, they would kill you. You should know that just by talking to people in town.”

“Y-yes. That’s why I was searching the area for some sort of secret route to the tomb, and then you showed up.”

“And you took advantage of the fact that we were able to get rid of the elves and followed us in,” continued Shinichi.

“Y-yes…,” she replied, her small frame shrinking as she looked up at him. She must have felt guilty about following after them and taking advantage of their success. “Y-you are here to destroy the tomb, right?”

“Why would you think—? Oh right, we said we were sent by the Holy Mother.” He realized the answer to his own question. She must have heard

about them from the owner or something and assumed they'd come to destroy the tomb. "That was a lie. We don't really have any desire to destroy the tomb."

"Oh, really?! That makes me so happy." Her surprise gave way to relief. Then she looked like she made up her mind, reaching her hand under her jacket. "A-actually, I have a map that shows the tomb."

"What?!" cried Shinichi in complete shock as she brought out a piece of parchment, and he took a guess at her situation. "I see. You decided to become an explorer because you managed to get your hands on that map."

"S-sorry…" Her parents must have been opposed to her becoming an explorer, causing her to run away from home. She was apologizing, but she rolled the map up like she was protecting it. "W-well then, you don't seem to know its location. I could let you use this…"

"If you wait a bit, I can get you one thousand gold pieces for it."

"M-money's not the issue. I want to go with you."

"I thought as much," said Shinichi with a sigh.

I didn't think a lady from a good family would be enticed by money, but this is a bit of a mess…

It'd be easiest to steal it from her, even if they had to kill her, but they couldn't do that in front of Rino.

Fey had no idea Shinichi was harboring these terrifying thoughts. "I—I know I'm just a dolt who doesn't know anything about the world, and I know I won't be of any use. The best thing for me to do would be to go home and get married, like my father says…" Her face twisted as she reflected. "B-but I want to make my dream come true, even if it's only one time!"

"Fey…," said Rino. Fey and her desire to accomplish something on her own was reminding Rino of herself. A short while ago, she had been in the same situation, unable to do anything and relying solely on the protection of the Demon King and Shinichi.

Shinichi frowned secretly when Rino began seeing herself in Fey.

This is bad…

It was hard to turn down a request from Rino. The only person harder to deny was her idiot father.

Shinichi decided he needed some input, telepathically connecting with Celes.

"What do you think?"

"Nothing she's said has been a lie."

"Did you use Liar Detector?"

"Yes. Did I cross a line?"

"No, as long as you're not pushing yourself. Thanks."

He appreciated Celes being on top of things, but he was still feeling on edge. They had just proved with the elves that your feet could be swept out from under you if you relied too heavily on magic.

“Fey hasn’t lied, and I don’t get the impression she’s hiding anything. But the fact that everything is so perfect makes this fishy. And her timing is just too good to be true.”

Just when they were lost on the way forward, an explorer with a map had showed up. Shinichi refused to believe something so convenient.

“There could be something behind it. It would be better to consider possible traps, right?” he said.

“What kind of traps could there be?”

“Well…”

Shinichi struggled to find an answer. He tried to think of people who would want to trap them and take their lives. But the only people who came to mind were extremist factions in the church opposed to the cease-fire. Except that didn’t add up, because Vermeita, King Sieg of Tigris, and a select few were the only ones who knew about their ties to the demons.

There was no reason to believe the extremist factions knew their identities. Even if these factions had managed to uncover them, they would rely on the strength of the undying heroes. Shinichi didn’t think they’d go to the trouble of sending a spy after them.

“Hey, Celes. What’s the likelihood that Fey is a magic user comparable to the Demon King?”

“It is impossible. I can feel she has as much magic in her as the average human.”

She didn’t need to consider the question. Lost magic power could be recovered by breathing, and any extra residual amount was expelled from the body. A powerful person can’t hide their aura. There was no doubt Fey was a normal person with no magical abilities.

She doesn’t have calluses, which means she can’t be an accomplished swordswoman. Maybe she is harmless, like she says.

She wouldn’t pose an active threat if she tagged along, though she would be an extra burden.

We don’t know if the elves are going to come back soon. I’d do almost anything to get that map. Rino seems to have bonded with her, too, since she seems harmless. But most importantly, we can’t just leave her in the wild.

Celes had removed the *Illusion* on herself before they entered the village because there was no one left to witness her. She needed to conserve energy, meaning her ears had been exposed this whole time.

“I forgot to ask you one thing,” said Shinichi.

“Y-yes?” replied Fey.

“You can see Celes is a demon. Do you still want to go with us?”

Fey nodded without pause. “A-at first, I was a little scared, but during this whole conversation, I realized she wasn’t all that different from humans. Besides, she’s traveling with Arian the Red, a hero, and this really kind girl.” She glanced at Arian and Rino with a relaxed smile. It might be fine with her, but it was still going to be a problem for Shinichi and the others.

If she lets it slip that she saw the hero traveling with the dark elf who has been assisting the True One, the unholy priest, things could get bad.

He reached the conclusion again that killing her would effectively keep her mouth shut. It would be the quickest option. But it just wasn’t a real option in front of Rino. Plus, she had the map. It would be the safest choice to take her with them.

But that’s exactly why I’m so reluctant…

It was like there was a paved road laid out in front of them, but he couldn’t get the image out of his head that it’d take them to the edge of a cliff.

“The best trick in the book isn’t to read your opponent but to construct a situation where they play right into your hand. Is that what someone’s trying to do now?” Shinichi asked Celes.

“And what’s the likelihood that you’re overanalyzing things because your own personality is twisted?”

“Well, I won’t say it’s zero.” He flashed her a wry smile.

When it came to judging another person, there was only one set of standards that you could reasonably apply: your own. That meant a liar would be incapable of trusting others, and a strategist would drown in their own schemes. Shinichi suspected Fey had a dirty plan because *he* had used the same strategies to defeat the heroes.

Only an idiot blindly trusts others…

Fey looked up at Shinichi, tears about to fall from her eyes. She must have been starting to feel uneasy with the silence.

“W-won’t you let me come along?”

“Shinichi…” Rino did the same to Shinichi, begging him.

He felt reluctant to say yes, but he couldn’t come up with any other ideas, and they didn’t have time to waste.

“Fine. Come explore the Elven Tomb with us,” he said grudgingly.

“R-really?! Thank you so much!” cried Fey.

“I’m so happy, Fey!” Rino leaped with joy as Fey bowed deeply to Shinichi.

He forced a smile on his lips and sent a telepathic message to Arian and Celes.

“Bring her down if she does anything even remotely suspicious. I’ll take the blame from Rino.”

“Okay. I don’t think you need to worry about Rino,” replied Arian.

“I agree. I think you underestimate her,” added Celes.

The two accepted the distasteful task, telling him not to worry and vouching for Rino. Shinichi thanked them and took another look at Fey’s face.

“By the way, I have one last question,” he said.

“Wh-what is it?” she said.

“How old are you?”

Her small frame and baby face made him think she was only slightly older than Rino, but since she was traveling alone, he was inclined to think she was at least the same age as Arian. But then again, she had made that comment about her age earlier, which implied there was a chance she was even older than Celes.

Fey blushed bright-red and pressed a finger to her lips.

“Th-that’s my little secret! ♥ ”

Shinichi remained on guard, wondering what they would do if the map turned out to be a fake. Following its symbols, the group went deep into the forest, eventually coming upon a blackened metal door half-swallowed by the mound on the ground.

“G-good! The map’s real,” said Fey.

“Even you doubted it?” asked Shinichi.

“I bought it from a minstrel, but they didn’t have any proof it was legitimate…” Fey seemed so relieved, she looked like she was about to collapse on the spot.

Shinichi stared at the map again. The drawing on the aged parchment was so detailed that he might mistake it for a satellite image.

Did people of this world have advanced cartography skills all along?

He had seen a few maps of the continent Uropeh during his research in the Holy City. He was currently carrying the highest-quality one he could get his hands on, but even that was vague and subpar compared to Fey’s map.

I guess it’s not impossible there are cartographers like Ino Tadataka. I mean, he made incredibly detailed maps ahead of his time…

Shinichi still had his doubts, but it did appear they’d arrived at their destination. At the very least, the map was real. He walked up to the entrance of the tomb and immediately noticed something out of place.

“What’s this?”

In addition to the metal door, there were thick steel rods sealing the entrance closed.

Celes stared at the entry, narrowing her eyes unhappily. “Sealed with *Hard Lock* and *Protection* spells, huh.”

“Seriously?” asked Shinichi.

“Yes. This level of spells indicates they reinforced them every day.”

That meant the elves must have taken shifts patrolling and recasting the spells on the entrance.

“Can you open it?” asked Shinichi.

“Maybe. If you would allow me to blast it open with a *False Dragon Breath.”*

“No way.”

Celes was almost entirely drained of magic as it was. There was no way she’d be able to cast her most powerful spell. She might be able to pull it off if Rino shared magic with her, but they’d be in trouble if the elves were drawn back by something so flashy.

“We don’t have time to wait for the spells to wear off… Arian, do you think you can cut through the wall?” asked Shinichi.

“I can try,” she replied, swinging her sword at the concrete wall half concealed by the heaped dirt. Her attack could easily cut through steel armor, but the tip of her sword got stuck in the wall, taking off only a small chunk. “No, that won’t work. Looks like it’s strengthened with magic here, too.”

“It’s like the safe in the castle,” said Rino with wide eyes.

Arian grimaced, her hand numb from the impact.

Shinichi inspected the sealed door again, brow creased in thought.

If it’s sealed, they wouldn’t be able to enter and exit. It must not actually be a tomb.

The elves would need to gain access to entomb someone when they passed away or to visit the graves of their relatives. It was far too inconvenient to use like a normal underground tomb.

It’s only called the “Elven Tomb.” This monument has to be made for some other purpose. Could this really be to keep invaders out?

If these spells were to protect the tomb from being destroyed by humans, it would make more sense for the elves to build their village with the tomb at its center. That way, they could be certain there were always elves around to protect it. But the village was a fair distance away, almost as if they were cautious of it. Despite the distance, patrols came every day to reinforce the spells, sealing the tomb.

This is bad…

Shinichi felt a shiver run up his spine as he thought of a way to break in.

As the ruins became dangerous, he felt like they were coming closer to the Goddess Elazonia who had been trying so hard to destroy them.

“Rino, could you use a *Tunnel* spell to dig along the wall with the door?” he said finally.

“Yes, but it can only dig through soft dirt.”

“That’s fine. Can you do that for me?”

“Of course! I’ll do my best!” said Rino, happy to help Shinichi. “Please move aside. *Tunnel.*”

In response to Rino’s cute little request, the earth opened up into a deep hole. Shinichi stood on the edge and used a *Light* spell to investigate it. It went down more than thirty feet, but the concrete wall continued the whole way, stretching even beyond the bottom of the hole.

“It goes pretty deep. Rino, could you do it two more times?” asked Shinichi.

“Yep, *Tunnel* and one more *Tunnel*!” cried Rino excitedly. The hole stretched down one hundred thirty feet, but the wall still continued.

“It’s almost like they buried an entire building,” observed Shinichi, somewhat annoyed. He had Celes use *Fly,* and the group gently fell to the bottom of the hole where he tapped on the dirty concrete.

“All right. Shall we try again?” he said.

“Oh, now I get it,” marveled Arian. She placed her hand on her sheathed magic sword, taking up the proper stance, and slashed into the concrete

wall. This time, the blade slid up into the wall, letting Arian completely sever it.

“It looks like *Protection* was only cast on the visible parts,” said Shinichi.

“Even the elves must have lacked the magic necessary to make the spell reach this depth,” said Celes. That meant this section belowground was nothing more than a normal concrete wall, unable to defend against Arian’s attacks. Celes was irritated by Shinichi’s usual craftiness, but Fey was practically trembling in excitement.

“I never would have thought of this!”

“Every good grave robber knows if the real entrance won’t work, make your own,” said Shinichi.

“B-but I was trying to be an explorer…,” said Fey, screwing her face up. This was just something she couldn’t let up.

While the two chatted, Arian finished slicing a hole open in the wall. The group finally made their way into the Elven Tomb.

“Ugh, it smells moldy,” said Arian.

“Well, yeah. I mean, check out all the cracks. It’s been here for who knows how many millennia,” said Shinichi, warily taking in his surroundings. The walls looked like they’d cave in during an earthquake. They’d entered a narrow stairwell, wide enough for two people to stand side by side, which continued deeper into the ground.

“Um. I’m a little scared…,” said Rino.

“Don’t worry. Arian and Celes are here if anything happens,” consoled Shinichi.

“Which means you have no intention of fighting, huh?” Celes snapped at him.

Shinichi started walking slowly down the stairs. The dismal stairwell seemed to continue forever. They were stuck in an optical illusion of a perpetual loop of stairs. That wasn’t the case, however. After descending a few flights, there was a black metal door.

“It’s not locked,” announced Shinichi as he pushed the door gently.

It opened with a horrific squeak. Beyond the door was a large, open underground space that could have easily fit multiple houses.

“This is even larger than the dvergr dens. I wonder what it was used for,” said Celes.

“Hmm. Maybe they used it to play ball on rainy days?” suggested Rino, shocked at the size.

Shinichi had noticed a pile of scrap metal in the corner and walked up to it. Most of it had rusted away, leaving its original shape a mystery. Only about a quarter remained, and Shinichi stood there, pondering its actual form. After a moment, he realized what it was, shaking with surprise.

“It’s a forklift,” he said.

“A *fore-clift*?” asked Arian, tilting her head as she stared at the pile of metal.

The large iron box had what looked like four wheels attached to it. Two long prongs jutted from its front.

If Arian had to describe it, she would manage to say it reminded her of a chariot, but in reality, all she saw was a pile of mystery metal. In Shinichi's eyes, it resembled the vehicles from home.

"Why is there a forklift here?!" Shinichi balked before looking around the ruins. On the inner wall, he saw a large, rusted metal door. Judging from its appearance, he guessed it was firmly stuck.

"This is…," he started.

"A door. But how do we open it?" finished Arian.

The single large sheet of metal didn't seem to have a knob of any kind. It probably slid up to open, like a castle's portcullis, but she also didn't see a winch to activate it.

"Maybe it's opened with magic?" suggested Celes.

"Well, it's like magic…," said Shinichi in vague terms as he reached his hand out to a small box set to the side of the door. It was rusted beyond recognition, but it looked to have buttons to open and close the door and displayed their current floor.

"It's a freight elevator. Possibly a scientific one that uses electricity."

"Science is magic from your world, right? Is it here?!" cried Rino, eyes as wide as saucers.

The other girls realized why Shinichi was so shocked.

"It's not like we did a thorough sweep of the elves' houses, but I don't think there was anything that used this much technology in the village. So why is there a forklift and elevator in ruins from millennia ago?!"

Though these were rusted beyond use, they had a level of technological advancement that went beyond the Middle Ages, even beyond early modernity. It was practically contemporary. This kind of thing didn't exist in Obum.

"…No, it doesn't exist…*now*," emphasized Shinichi, his brain cells finally offering up one possible theory. "This is an underground facility created by an ancient civilization long ago, a civilization before the calamity."

"Is this building from the time of legends?!" yelped Arian in surprise.

They were talking about the ancient era of human prosperity that was destroyed by the Evil God's army—or the calamity, depending on who you asked. It was a story told in the church's holy book and in legends in the demon world. But with no real proof of its existence, it was hard to swallow the idea that this society had been real and had reached this level of technological advancement.

"I can't think of any other explanation. I mean, humans, demons, not even the elves have anything on this level. It would only be possible for the ancient civilization that was destroyed," said Shinichi, even though he didn't want to believe it. After all, once he eliminated all other possibilities, this could be the only correct answer.

“I used to laugh off the idea about ancient civilizations on the lost continent of Mu or Atlantis. I never thought I’d actually see one…” He had on a half-smile. He didn’t find it on Earth but in a different universe.

Shinichi looked around the ancient ruins again. As he did, his eyes fell on the dumbfounded face of Fey.

Crap, I totally forgot she was here!

He’d gone off using words like *forklift* and *elevator*, things that no human of this world should ever know. Rino had even said “your world,” meaning Fey had heard a whole conversation that would tell her he came from a different one. He panicked, trying to think of how he could wriggle his way out of this one, but Fey’s eyes lit up like gems as she took his hand.

“Shinichi—I mean, *Master* Shinichi! Please be my mentor!”

“…What?”

“W-well, you’re obviously an explorer, too! A-and you have more experience than me!”

Shinichi didn’t even have time to correct her as she chattered on, as unstoppable as a runaway train.

“You even know the names of ancient civilizations beyond the adventure novels! You must be really accomplished!”

“Well, actually…”

“A-and I thought it was strange that you wanted to come and search the Elven Tomb, but it makes perfect sense for an explorer to be here!”

“Yeah, um, sure.” Shinichi nodded to Fey, who’d had this fortunate misunderstanding on her own.

Now that she mentions it, I never said I’d come because I was hoping to find a clue to uncover the Goddess’s true nature.

It was her fault that she had assumed he was just like her, wanting to experience the thrill of finding ancient remains.

This is another case of “judging someone by your own standards.” But I am concerned for her future…

He could only imagine Fey getting deceived by some untrustworthy man, ending up in a terrible situation like one in an erotic novel—though not to the same extent as a certain lewd elf.

“You know, it’s not too late. You should go back home and marry a nice boy, like your dad says,” said Shinichi.

“H-how rude! There’s no way I could go home with these wonderful ruins right in front of me!”

“Yeah, Shinichi! It’s mean to tell her to go home!” protested Rino. They were both angry at him for the suggestion he’d actually made out of the kindness of his own heart.

“Well, you don’t have to get married or whatever, but I do think it’d be safer for you to go home…” His eyes met Arian’s.

Her gaze told him she agreed before turning back to pointedly look at Fey’s smooth hands, which still gripped his.

“I agree. If you wish, I can send her away with magic,” added Celes, eyeing Fey, who was something she had no experience with—a beautiful girl in glasses.

Shinichi, suddenly noticing the ominous vibe from Celes, yanked his hands away and forced the conversation back on track.

“Anyway, this appears to have been built by some ancient civilization. We don’t know what we’ll find down here, so we need to proceed with caution.”

“Wh-whatever you say, master!” cried Fey.

Shinichi wasn’t entirely unhappy at the thought of being worshipped by the cute, bespectacled girl, but he didn’t let that show on his face to avoid upsetting the other girls. They were ready to explore the ruins.

On the wall opposite from the freight elevator was a door small enough that a person could open it, so they decided to start there. The door led to a long passage, which was wide enough that the forklifts could enter. They were around fifteen feet across with rusted doors placed at regular intervals along the corridor. They checked inside each one, but unfortunately, they didn’t see anything of interest.

“I wonder if this was a desk and a chair?” guessed Arian.

“B-but it’s all rotten and fallen apart,” said Fey.

“There’s a toilet and bathtub over here,” Rino observed.

“Though dirty and unusable, I imagine,” offered Celes.

“I know we can’t expect much since it’s been thousands of years, but I find it hard to believe there isn’t a single book left.” Shinichi sighed as he looked about the room that had nothing but the broken remains of furniture.

All we’ve found are the living quarters. This probably wasn’t some sort of military facility. Which means…

Shinichi was starting to guess the true nature of this place called the Elven Tomb. He headed farther inside, hoping to find proof of his theory, and found another set of stairs. He descended to the second basement floor.

“Th-the architecture is the same as the floor above,” noted Fey.

“This might not be worth it, but…” Shinichi decided to investigate a nearby room.

At the same time, Arian, who was leading the group, held up a hand, calling for the party to halt. “There’s something moving ahead.”

“What if it’s a giant cockroach? *Yow!*” yelped Shinichi.

“Don’t even joke about that,” warned Celes, her face pale after she had tightened her hands around Shinichi’s neck to strangle him.

He was trying to listen for movement and heard a low scraping sound, like something heavy being intermittently dragged across the floor.

“……”

Arian didn’t say a word as she drew her magic sword. Celes readied herself to cast a spell. The glow from her *Light* spell illuminated part of the path, and they saw something coming toward them slowly, dragging one leg uselessly on the ground.

“…A robot?” said Shinichi, the words falling unexpectedly from his lips. Appearing before them was a blackened metal humanoid figure as tall as a normal man. “No, wait. Is it a golem like the one in the elves’ village?”

“Yes, one made from steel. I can feel magic coming from inside it,” confirmed Celes.

“Of course,” said Shinichi, convinced but a little disappointed. After all, every boy loved a good robot. He stopped feeling that way, though, the moment he saw the golem point a barrel in their direction.

“Celes!” he shouted.

“Magic Shield.” Her spell created a shimmering shield of light large enough to span the path. That was when fire erupted from the barrel.

“Wh-what?!” cried Arian.

Explosions echoed through the corridor, like someone casting a chain of *Fireballs*. Each one was followed by a small object that collided into the shield of light, bouncing back with a shower of sparks. Arian had never seen a weapon like it, but Shinichi grabbed her arm and pulled her into a nearby room. The others followed closely. When they disappeared, the explosions stopped, and they heard the dragging sound of its leg as it started walking again.

“Shit, this wasn’t supposed to be a horror movie with killer robots!” cursed Shinichi before calming himself down and setting aside his suspicions to give orders to get them out of this situation.

“Rino, cast *Missile Protection* on Arian. Is that possible?”

“I can try!”

“Arian, that’s a weapon that shoots a succession of small metal balls. They fly in a straight line from the barrel. They shouldn’t hit if you keep going off that axis,” he continued.

“Is it like a fast-firing crossbow?”

“Yeah. Can you do it?”

“Leave it to me.” Arian nodded.

Rino cast the spell, encasing Arian in wind that would knock the bullets off track. Arian dashed out the room.

As soon as she did, they heard the fire from the golem’s barrel, a type of automatic handgun. Even though the pathway was wide, Arian quickly ran out of places to run from the hail of bullets. Just when Shinichi thought she was going to jump forward to her right, she ran up the wall, somersaulted up, and planted her feet on the ceiling. The golem’s rusted arm couldn’t follow her irregular three-dimensional pattern, and all the bullets cut through nothing but air.

“Hi-yah!”

Arian kicked off from the ceiling, flying down like a shooting star as she slashed off the golem's right arm along with its gun. She followed through with a horizontal slash that chopped off the golem's head. The creature crumpled to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

"Arian, you're amazing!" cried Rino.

"She's practically a ninja…," said Shinichi as they peered cautiously out from the doorway. They gave her a round of applause.

They checked there wasn't any real danger before running out to Arian.

"You killed it?" asked Shinichi.

"I think so…," replied Arian.

The golem had lost its arm and head, and it wasn't moving at all. But since it wasn't a living creature, that didn't necessarily mean it was dead. Arian remained on guard with her sword drawn. Shinichi saw her and decided to be careful, but he turned his eyes to the gun in the golem's right hand that now laid on the ground.

There aren't any bullet casings, and I don't smell any gunpowder. Besides, any gunpowder would've gotten damp over thousands of years and become virtually unusable. But there were explosions, so it can't be a type of rail gun…

He picked up the blackened weapon to examine it. While the general shape was like a gun, the details were different from what he was familiar with.

There's no ejection port for spent casings. That's the magazine, but it only has bullets—no casing and no gunpowder. But it uses the same explosive force to propel bullets as the guns on Earth… Does it use magic to fire?

Inspecting the gun, there was a familiar crystal on the grip. It was a magic conductor. The user needed to pour their magic into the stone, which was used to cast miniature *Explosions* inside the gun to create the force necessary to fire the bullet.

Since it doesn't need full cartridges, they could simplify the design. And because they don't use gunpowder, the barrel won't get as dirty. They can use the extra space to fit in more bullets. It's wonderfully made, but it has a fatal flaw: You can't shoot it without magic.

An average person wouldn't be able to use it. A magic user would find it too heavy and inconvenient. It didn't have enough firepower to be effective against someone who could use *Missile Protection*. That meant it was a weapon perfect for a golem but with little other value.

If that's the case, I don't think a magic user would come up with the idea for the magic gun. I imagine this ancient civilization had conventional guns that used gunpowder, and—

"Shinichi, get down!" shouted Arian.

He ducked immediately. A moment later, he looked up and saw a translucent hand made of bluish-white light extending from the torso of the defeated golem.

“Wh-what the hell is that?!” stammered Shinichi, scurrying backward until Celes stopped him and answered his question.

“A ghost, most likely.”

“What? A ghost?”

As Shinichi watched, the translucent body of the ghost came out of the golem, placing its two smoky, blurred legs on the ground. Its face was hazy, too, having lost any definition. There was nothing that could be gathered from its indistinct features—whether it was a man or a woman, angry or sad. It slowly stretched out its hands toward the closest person, Arian, like it wanted nothing more than to feel her warmth.

“Arian!” warned Shinichi, but it wasn’t necessary. There was no hesitation as she swung her sword at the oncoming hand of the advancing ghost.

“Aaaahh—!”

You wouldn’t have thought a ghost could feel pain, but it let out a shriek when Arian lopped off its arm, and then it lunged forward, trying to envelop her in its embrace. She stood her ground, let out a piercing battle cry, and her sword flashed.

“Hi-yah—!”

In all directions, Arian’s sword sliced through the ghost’s body. The slashes left scattered shards of the bluish-white light, which then faded away into the air.

“Phew…”

“Sh-she defeated a ghost with ease… That’s the Red Hero for you!” Fey exclaimed, her eyes sparkling.

Shinichi gave Arian another round of applause, but he had a pained smile on his face.

“I heard about it from the Demon King, but it’s sad to see a ghost losing to physical attacks…”

In the land of magic and wonder, the spirits of the dead were nothing more than another monster to be defeated. He couldn’t help feeling down, since he had grown up in a world where ghosts inspired uncontrollable fear in the living.

“Well, I guess I love that one movie where they bust ghosts. Anyway, you really seemed to know what you were doing,” he told Arian.

“Yeah, I’ve had to beat ghosts who knows how many times. They hang around old battlefields.” Her lips spread into an embarrassed smile at the compliment.

“So they’re normal things, huh…? But why was there a ghost inside the golem?” he asked. This was the Elven Tomb, and if it was what Shinichi was starting to think it was, there was no reason to be surprised by a ghost appearance. He wasn’t fazed by the golem that acted as a security guard, but he’d never heard of a ghost possessing a golem.

Celes was the one to answer his question. “My guess is that it was trying to escape death.”

“Huh. But isn’t it already dead?” asked Shinichi.

“My apologies. It would be more accurate to call it *lost*, which is when they fade away,” she corrected. “When ghosts form, their magic does not disperse. Instead, the ghost attaches itself to the world and solidifies into what we just witnessed. That’s why a powerful magic user is more likely to become a ghost than someone with a little magic. And it’s the reason my magic teacher, Lady Regina, would always destroy any opponents until they didn’t possess the smallest shred of magic.”

“Daddy did the same thing,” offered Rino matter-of-factly.

“A merciless couple.” Shinichi shuddered. It was the correct course of action to ensure they wouldn’t be attacked any further, but something about killing someone to the point of eliminating their soul gave him chills.

“So a ghost is a collection of magical energy, but it cannot create magic itself,” said Celes.

Since magic was an energy generated by a living creature’s body, that checked out for the ghosts who had lost their physical form.

“In other words, they’ll end up fading away if left alone?” asked Shinichi.

“Exactly,” said Celes gravely. “We have a saying about them: Existence makes a ghost go hungry. Meaning they’ll continue to expend their magic by simply existing, until it is exhausted.”

“That’s why they attack animals and humans in an effort to feed by stealing their magic,” explained Arian.

“Which would be why people need to defeat ghosts: They’re dangerous because they’re trying to avoid their natural death.” Shinichi nodded at Arian’s addition, but he was still confused. “I get the nature of ghosts, but what’s that got to do with the one possessing the golem?”

“Well… I apologize, but could you please slice here?” Celes had walked over to the immobile golem, indicating the spot to Arian.

“Sure, no problem! Hi-yah!” Arian cried out, severing the metal body in two, revealing a familiar crystal inside.

“Is that a magic conductor?” asked Shinichi.

“Yes. The golem would be able to continue moving for a while even without a magic user nearby—as long as magic has been stored in here,” explained Celes. It was the same with the golem working in the fields in the elves’ village—and Hellsaur, the massive stone dragon that Shinichi had made with the others.

“I think I see where this is going. Ghosts are amalgamations of magical energy. If they don’t do anything, they will eventually fade away. Magic conductors have a property that allows them to absorb and store magic, which means—,” started Shinichi.

“The ghost went into the magic conductor in the golem’s body so it wouldn’t disappear!” finished Rino in excitement.

“Exactly, Lady Rino. Clever as always,” praised Celes, giving her a round of applause and smiling broadly.

“You treat me so differently!” Shinichi protested, clapping his hands, too.

“Hee-hee. You’re making me blush,” said Rino.

“B-but doesn’t that mean ghosts don’t want to die?” asked Fey innocently. The happy vibe immediately dissolved.

“Oh…” Rino’s face clouded over with sadness when she realized that they’d killed the ghost who’d possessed the golem’s body to stay alive.

Celes saw the girl’s sorrow and immediately explained, “Ghosts don’t possess any of their intelligence upon death. All they have is an obsession with life.”

The person’s refusal to let go of life manifested as their final spell, changing reality to make a ghost. But that kind of magic didn’t possess a brain or a body to create magic.

“Even though they’ve died, they are nothing more than a danger and nuisance to the living,” she concluded.

“It’s kind to help them move on to the next world where they can rest,” added Shinichi, gently patting Rino’s head as he tried to tell her not to be sad.

“Okay…”

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t really mean anything by my question…,” offered Fey, since Rino still looked a little dejected.

That was when they heard the clunk of heavy metal feet coming from the stairwell.

“Ugh! There’s more?” Shinichi groaned.

“And it’s not just one or two.” Arian grimaced, urging the others to hide in a nearby room.

“I’ll assist you,” Celes volunteered, pushing through her fatigue and stepping to the front, but Arian told her to get back.

“No, we shouldn’t attack with magic here.”

The passing millennia had made the concrete walls weak and brittle. The golem’s bullets had created cracks and fissures. Shards of concrete were flaking off. There was no guarantee that an explosion from a spell like *Fireball* wouldn’t bury them alive.

Celes got it and compliantly dropped behind. “Understood. I leave it in your capable hands.”

“Yep, I got this!” replied Arian with an energetic thump on her chest.

Shinichi knew he’d only get in her way, so he went to hide, asking only one question out of concern.

“Sure you’ll be okay?” he confirmed, and Arian turned to him with a huge smile on her face.

“I’ll be fine. I’m a hero, remember?”

She wasn’t talking about the cowards who tried to escape death by achieving undying bodies. She was speaking about the courageous figures standing against danger to protect those she loved.

“You deserve to rest,” she called out to the ghosts.

And then she faced the dead who had feared death so much, they had fled into shells of steel with something akin to pity as she rushed forward, magic sword in hand.

It didn't even take ten minutes for Arian to dispatch the ten golems and the ten ghosts that had been possessing them. But since she went without rest, her breathing became ragged. She managed to avoid any serious injury with Rino's *Missile Protection* and her half-dragon resilience, but she had burns and scratches on her arms and legs where bullets had scraped her skin.

"Pain, pain, fly away! *Full Healing.*"

"…Phew! Thanks, Rino." Arian was healed with Rino's spell, though a shadow of fatigue colored her smile.

"Yeah, it must've been hard against so many and with guns, too," added Shinichi.

"Actually, the golems didn't give me much trouble. But the ghosts…" Arian savored the moment as Shinichi used a handkerchief to mop the sweat from her face. "You have to beat them up until they're scattered into little bits, and if they touch you, they steal your magic, even if you're wearing armor. Not a fun opponent to fight."

"And one you should technically fight with magic, not with weapons," he added.

The latter would basically be like trying to blow away smoke with a sword. While physical attacks were effective, they weren't ideal. A sword could only reach them at a point or in a line, while a spell could cover a wide range. It would be more effective, but they couldn't do that, fearing the ruins would cave in on them.

"How annoying." Shinichi kicked a severed piece of one of the golems, looking up to observe everyone's condition.

Arian seemed physically exhausted, Celes was almost out of magic, and Rino was beginning to get worn down from casting spells. Exploring the unfamiliar territory and fighting unexpected enemies had left the party physically and emotionally spent.

"We've got no choice. Let's pull back and rest up for the day," Shinichi said.

"Wait, what?!" cried Fey in protest, but she seemed to understand and nodded in agreement. "Y-you're right. There must be more ghosts in here, and we can't just keep pushing ourselves forward."

"A golden rule of dungeon exploration: Moving forward too fast will push you back. I'm worried the elves will realize our stunt was a lie and come back, but we won't have anything to show if we get ourselves killed," said Shinichi.

Arian could be resurrected because she was a hero. But the rest of them might perish in a way where they couldn't come back. And if Rino happened

to die, the Blue Demon King would lose his voice of reason and turn into the Demon King of Hatred. That might just mean the end of this world and everything in it. Weighing the risks, Shinichi knew the only choice was to retreat.

"You're right. It's unfortunate, but we should go back," Arian agreed.

"What if we call Daddy and ask him to help?"

"No, I don't think the ruins can handle His Highness's power," said Shinichi.

The others agreed.

They filed back the way they came and exited the Elven Tomb. The sun was starting to set. They left the forest, made their way back to the elves' village where they found a two-story home, and entered it.

"E-excuse us," called Fey.

"Are you sure it's okay to enter?" asked Arian.

"It's fine. Even if the elves came back, we have leverage: We can offer to set up a mixer with the dark elves. They wouldn't kill us," replied Shinichi, convincing the others this was safer than the ruins, which had ghosts, or the forest, which could house monsters and beasts.

"If you still feel guilty about it, you can leave some gold coins to pay for our time here," he suggested.

"I doubt the elves would use our currency," said Celes.

"Sure. But they could use the gold to make jewelry. It's not entirely worthless to them." Shinichi explained that was why gold had become a standard currency throughout the world. He stepped from the entryway into the living room, then on to the kitchen. "I'll fix dinner. The rest of you can relax."

"Oh yay! We get to eat Shinichi's homemade food!" exclaimed Rino.

Fey raised her hand. "I—I can help, too, since I wasn't much use in the tomb…"

"I appreciate the offer, but how would a girl from a nice family know how to cook?" said Shinichi.

"I—I can make fish pie!"

"Sit down." Shinichi unapologetically turned down her offer, even though she was determined to help. He knew just how bad food could be, based on his knowledge of a certain country in the United Kingdom.

"B-but it's so delicious…"

"Fey, what's fish pie?" asked Rino.

"Um, well, you take vegetables and fish and wrap it in puff pastry…," Fey started to explain, her frown dissipating as she talked with Rino.

Shinichi looked around the kitchen in confusion. "Isn't there an oven or stove?"

He had managed to find a frying pan, pot, and other cooking utensils, but the essential items to actually heat the food were nowhere to be seen. It's not like he'd expected a gas range or an electric stove, but he would've thought there'd be at least a wood-burning one.

“How do they heat…? Oh right, magic,” he said, having a light-bulb moment.

They wouldn’t need a stove if they could use magic to create fire or to directly heat the food. Looking closer around the room, he realized there were no lamps or candles, since they could just use *Light*. There was a chest holding ingredients that utilized *Freeze*. Every facet of the home was built around magic.

“Instead of all electric, they’ve gone all magic,” he joked. “But this house would be horrible for a human.”

If an elf and a human happened to form a family, they’d quickly find a number of problems with daily life that would make things quite difficult.

“It seems elves are better off marrying elves, even if they didn’t look down on humans,” murmured Shinichi, rooting through the kitchen to find ingredients for dinner. “Wheat, potatoes, carrots, beans. But what’s with all these seasonings and spices?”

In this world, even human restaurants only had salt and small amounts of vegetable oils, but this elf kitchen had all sorts of small vials filled with a variety of seasonings.

“Sugar, vinegar, black pepper, herbs. This is… Ugh, it smells! Is it marmite?!”

The jars and vials had mystery powders and liquids that even Shinichi couldn’t figure out.

“But the fields didn’t seem large enough to produce this wide variety. Maybe it’s safer to assume they used a spell like *Element Conversion* to create these.”

That spell manipulated atoms to create a desired substance. It was something like Shinichi’s signature move, but that didn’t mean he was the only one capable of using it. It was just that he had been the only one with the knowledge about chemical structure.

“I guess it’s not impossible for the elves to know.”

There were advanced scientific and technological capabilities deep within those ancient ruins, which the elves guarded. He was trying to pull out the answers from his brain when Celes’s voice came from behind.

“You’re not cooking—just standing here talking to yourself. Have you gone senile already?”

“If you have enough energy to insult me, would you mind handling this meat?”

“Asking a girl to handle your meat? How dirty.”

“And this is why people think you’re a smutty pervert!” Shinichi shooed Celes away as her stomach growled. He picked up a knife and started to cut potatoes, carrots, and venison into equal pieces, then poured some olive oil into a large pot.

“Then I’ll use *Fire*—no, it’d be more efficient to use *Heat* directly on the pot,” he muttered.

It was his first time using magic to cook. Truthfully, he was a little overwhelmed, but he plopped the cut vegetables and meat into the pot and heated it. Afterward, he poured water into the pot, using a spell to make the pot boil. He skimmed the oil on the top and then popped open the lids of some of the seasoning vials.

"I can't believe they have this one," he said, half-happy that he had found a flavor that he'd given up on ever tasting again. The other half of him was confused how the elves made it.

He poured the yellowish-brown powder into the pot, making the food give off a spicy aroma.

"Wow! Something smells good!" said Rino.

"B-but it seems a little spicy…," added Fey, mixing excitement with concern.

Shinichi brought the full pot out to them.

"Okay, eat up. It might not look like much, but I guarantee it's good."

"What is this? A brown soup with potatoes and carrots?" asked Arian.

"It's curry. Too bad we don't have rice."

Instead of rice, he was serving the curry with some soft bread.

"It looks so good," said Rino, filled with curiosity. She was the first to try a bite. Her eyes lit up at the complex flavors. "Mmm! It's spicy and sweet, and it's so, so good!"

"Y-you're right. I-it doesn't taste as spicy as it smells," Fey said.

"I thought it would be too spicy, since you're not used to these flavors, so I mixed in a little honey. I'm glad you like it." Shinichi was relieved that even Fey was smiling and enjoying the food despite her initial uncertainty.

"I think the spiciness is perfect when you eat it with the bread," observed Celes.

"It's so different from the bitter bread made from dark rye! White bread is so sweet," added Arian.

The two of them seemed to enjoy the curry, and the pot was empty in no time.

"Phew! Thank you for the meal," said Rino, patting her stomach in satisfaction.

Celes drank some water and complained, "I cannot help but feel envious of the surface elves for eating well every day."

"I know how you feel." Shinichi had gone so long without something as good as Japanese food. "Turns out, I *do* want to make good relations with the elves."

Obviously, he wanted to get in on their quality ingredients. Plus, he couldn't pass up on the knowledge and magic that let the elves harvest them.

"But don't you think it's impossible? I mean, we already treated them so horribly." Arian's assumption was only natural, but Shinichi shook his head.

"Some countries trade with their biggest enemies. Even if we aren't friendly enough to hold hands and skip, I think we can still work together."

Besides, they still had leverage—they could introduce them to the dark elves—so it wouldn’t be completely impossible. Shinichi tried to clean up the dishes, but Fey jumped in and stopped him.

“I—I can at least wash the dishes.”

“Well, all right. Thanks. I’ll go check out the situation upstairs. Rino, Celes, Arian—hang out here.”

“Okay… *Yawn…*,” Rino replied.

Shinichi left the girls, sleepy from eating their fill, and went upstairs to look for bedrooms.

“Only three beds, huh?”

This house must have belonged to a married couple with one kid. There was the dad’s room, tidy and simple; the mom’s room, decorated with knitted items; and the child’s room with paper and things strewn about the floor.

“What a mess…,” muttered Shinichi with a creased brow, picking up some of the paper fallen in the kid’s room. Written on it were some characters different from any human or demon language. He looked at them for a moment and felt a sudden sharp pain in his head.

“…Ow! Mr. Translate, is that you?”

He was talking about the translation magic that had been used on him when he was summoned to this world. It was trying to analyze the lines of text, which seemed to place significant stress on Shinichi’s brain. In conversation, the magic could access his partner’s facial expression, hand gestures, and most importantly, their thoughts in a similar vein as *Telepathy*. That was how it provided him a good translation.

But with written language, it didn’t have access to that additional information. It was like when someone attempted to crack a code. It had to analyze the frequency of repeated characters in the giant block of text and look for familiar words.

A scholar could spend their entire life trying to decipher an undiscovered language and never understand a single word. Fortunately, this elven script and human writing had a few things in common, so Shinichi started to get the gist of the texts after scanning a few different pages.

“That headache was a bad one, but you’ve done a great job, Mr. Translate. But this…”

The scattered pages seemed to be parts of a novel. The fragments strewn on the ground were pages the author had deemed unacceptable. There was one word that kept standing out to Shinichi’s eyes.

“I bet there’s a finished version somewhere,” he said as he looked around the room, lifting up the mattress on the bed to check underneath. There, he found the stack of papers, and an evil smile stretched across his face as he slipped them into his pocket.

Afterward, he went downstairs and saw Rino and Celes already asleep on the couch and Arian looking at him with sleepy eyes.

“I guess we’ll have to carry them,” he said.

“Yeah,” agreed Arian.

She picked up Rino, and Shinichi did the same to Celes. They carried the two to the second floor, placing them in the large bed that belonged to the dad.

“Arian, you can use the room next door. Fey, you can use the kid’s room across the hall. Sorry it’s a mess. I’ll sleep on the couch downstairs.”

“What?! But that’d make me feel bad for you!” protested Arian.

“Well, there aren’t any other beds,” he replied at a loss.

Arian’s face turned bright red as she muttered, “…Well, we *could* share a bed?”

“What?!” Shinichi’s cheeks burned red as he was caught off guard.

Then his eyes met Fey’s. Her face was just as flushed as his.

“I—I sleep like a log when I’m out. A-and I won’t wake up until morning, so you don’t have to worry about me!”

“Worry about *what*?!”

Obviously, Arian hadn’t meant anything, but Fey scurried off to the child’s room before they could finish talking. That left Shinichi and Arian standing there in an awkward silence. Finally, they both waved.

“…Right. I’ll sleep downstairs,” said Shinichi.

“…Yep, sorry for being weird,” replied Arian.

Shinichi walked uncomfortably down the stairs and flopped on the couch in the living room.

“Plus, Rino and Celes are there,” he said to no one in particular, only able to imagine the tragedy that would play out when the two woke up right before anything happened.

Shinichi pushed fantasies about Arian out of his mind, pulling out the pages he’d hidden in his pocket. He read through them to cool his flustered head before using the cloak of the unholy priest as a blanket and closed his eyes.

Intermission
A Day in the Life of the Holy Mother

Francoise was a priestess employed by the Holy Mother Vermeita. She was currently taking care of the children in the orphanage in Vermeita's place. The Holy Mother seemed so busy lately.

Francoise was finding she had a problem.

"Did you see Mimolette's new release? It's the best!"

"I thought my heart was going to beat out of my chest when I saw the new character! Oooh, when the cocky butler with dark skin and a sadistic side made a move on the main character with black hair…!"

"When I was reading it, I totally thought that cold butler would be a top, but he was actually a *bottom*! Mimolette is a genius!"

The three oldest girls in the orphanage were gathered in a corner of the dining hall, chatting excitably about something, but—

"You look like you're having fun. What are you talking about?" asked Francoise.

"……"

When Francoise walked up, the girls didn't even make a peep with plastered smiles on their faces. She could have heard a pin drop in the room.

"We were thinking about tonight's menu, Lady Francoise," offered one.

"There's still some of that squash that we received from a member of the church. We were brainstorming what we could make with something like that," continued another.

"Y-yeah."

It was clear they were skirting around the real topic, but Francoise had a soft and somewhat shy side, so she didn't press them further and left.

"What exactly are those girls hiding…?"

That was Francoise's problem. Vermeita had raised the children of the orphanage with her love. Those three girls were very good children who often helped look after the younger ones. Recently, though, they'd been gathering and hosting discussions in secret. They wouldn't let her know what they were discussing.

"I wonder if they're being naughty…"

Even though they were in the Holy City, which served as the center of the church, there were still plenty of shady areas like the red-light district. She couldn't help feeling worried that they might have wandered into one of those places, deceived by some ill-intentioned man.

"It *did* sound like they were talking about boys… I really should go speak with Lady Vermeita about it."

It would mean exposing her own inability to handle the children. But their futures were on the line.

Fortunately, the Holy Mother had finished up her responsibilities, wrapping up a formal agreement for the cease-fire with the demons. She had returned to the orphanage. This was the only chance Francoise had to ask for the Holy Mother's guidance.

Francoise went to visit her room.

"…I see. They're having secret conversations, huh?" said Vermeita after Francoise had explained the situation to her. But she didn't seem concerned, patting Francoise gently on the shoulder. "Don't worry. I think you may just be a little too concerned. The girls aren't participating in anything against the Goddess's teachings."

"But…," protested Francoise.

"They're at an age when they have secrets, keeping even their mother or sisters in the dark. Weren't you the same when you were their age?"

"Y-yes, that is true!" exclaimed Francoise as the Holy Mother gave her a smile befitting the name. Francoise realized she must be right.

That's when Vermeita suddenly seemed to remember something.

"By the way, I had something I was hoping you could help me with. Is that all right?"

"Of course. What can I do for you?" replied Francoise.

"If you wouldn't mind, read this and let me know what you think." Vermeita pulled a large folder from her desk.

"What's this?" asked Francoise when she opened it, glancing at a few dozen sheets of paper covered in drawings and words.

"It's a *manga*. A good friend of mine made it. It's a new type of picture book."

"A manga?" murmured Francoise, flipping through a few of the pages. She saw simplified pictures and writing that seemed to predominantly be the characters' lines. The story was easy to digest. "This is amazing. More people would read the Goddess's holy book if we made it into a manga!"

"…Yes, that is true." There had been a beat that passed before Vermeita answered.

But Francoise was too engrossed in the comic to notice.

"Oh, it's about boys deepening their friendship by playing ball. Awww, they look so happy… Um, *what*?!" Her smile instantly disappeared as she flushed red.

"What's wrong?"

"Wh-what's *wrong*?! There are two boys kissing!" Francoise cried, holding out the page to Vermeita who didn't seem to understand.

It was a drawing of a stoic boy catching the lips of his energetic rival. But Vermeita didn't seem ruffled at all, even when confronted by the image.

"Hmm? Doesn't it say that kissing is just a common greeting between friends and family in his country?"

"Well, yes, but romance between the same gender is…," Francoise started disapprovingly, but Vermeita's eyes widened in surprise.

“What? Isn’t this a story about two boys reconciling their friendship through a game of ball?”

“Uh…,” hesitated Francoise.

“I was sure that was the point of the story…,” murmured Vermeita.

“Yes, of course. I misunderstood!” Unable to stand Vermeita’s innocent gaze, Francoise desperately tried to backpedal on her previous claim.

She’s right! Why would I think this is a romance between two boys…?

Francoise reflected on the situation. She realized she’d been looking at the manga through her own dirty assumptions. For some reason, she couldn’t stop her heart racing in her chest.

“Well? What is your impression of the manga?” asked Vermeita.

“Um, well…”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t rush you. If you’d like, you can take it for the night and read it again. Let me know what you think tomorrow.”

“Yes, that sounds good!” replied Francoise enthusiastically with a nod, an involuntary smile on her face.

Vermeita didn’t forget to warn her newest convert.

“By the way, there is only one of this manga in the entire world. It’s very precious. Please keep it hidden from the children, so they don’t accidentally tear the pages or something.”

“Yes, I will protect it with my life,” replied Francoise, hugging the comic to her chest as she left the room, swearing to keep it a secret. It would be social suicide to let this out.

Once Francoise’s footsteps had faded in the distance, Vermeita’s mouth stretched into an evil smile. Everything was going to plan. It could have been the smile of a particular Dirty Advisor or the Saint.

“I’m glad I asked Mimolette to make a version without anything explicit.”

Even if they didn’t have a natural inclination to seek out this content, she could use it to drag them deeper into her little swamp.

“Hee-hee-hee. First, I will create more converts, and then I will start mass-producing manga to spread them to the corners of this world.”

A master at spreading propaganda, Vermeita smiled her rotten smile, knowing one day, she would have created the homeland of manga.

This would later be known as the momentous time. The orphanage would become known as the manga artist factory—or, as the Demon King’s advisor liked to call it, the Dirty Tokiwa-sou, referencing a hub for prominent manga artists in Japan.

Chapter 3
Screams of the Dead

Back when Shinichi was in his second year of elementary school…

He was on his way to school with the girl who had been his close friend since kindergarten.

“Shinichi, is there a dead cat somewhere?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I was watching an anime yesterday where a cat died from getting hit by a car. A character on the show buried it, and I thought, *What a sweet girl!*”

“And?” prodded Shinichi.

“If I bury a dead cat, then *I* can be the sweet girl!” she exclaimed, looking all proud.

Shinichi just glanced coldly at the dumbass. “You’re the worst for wanting a stray cat to die for your benefit.”

“Oh my God, you’re right! I’m terrible!” She immediately accepted his opinion, banging her head on a telephone pole. “I’m so sorry, kitties! I’m sorry!”

“Cut it out. You’ll dent the telephone pole.”

“I’m so sorry, telephone pole!” she cried, bowing her head in apology to the silent fixture. The other children stared at her in confusion.

“You’re so dumb and embarrassing.”

“Aww! Hee-hee! You’re making me blush.”

“That wasn’t a compliment!” Shinichi snapped. He really didn’t act like a second-year elementary school student. He let out a deep sigh. “How can someone as dumb as you stay alive?”

“Hey, I’ve got you to look after me, so I’ll be fine!”

“…I’m not allowed to have pets at home.”

“*Woof!* Don’t abandon me!”

“Shut up!” shot back Shinichi.

Even though she had no brain cells, her humor was top-notch.

This was how they spent their days—without anything extraordinary. There were no fierce battles with magic spells, no love stories to make your heart skip a beat, no drama that would ever make it to the screen. Everything was totally normal. Just average.

Even so, Shinichi never thought the days were ever monotonous.

“…What the…?”

Shinichi woke up with a pounding headache. He was confused to see a face with glasses right in front of his. Fey had come down to his couch, snoring next to him.

“Hey, wake up,” he said.

“Mm-mmm… Ah, good morning.”

“Morning. Could you explain what’s going on here?”

“Uh. Um…” She rubbed her eyes sleepily, slowly taking in her surroundings. *“What?”* Fey yelped, jumping back in surprise. “M-master Shinichi, this is wrong! You’re with Arian!”

“I’m asking for an explanation because I don’t want anyone to misunderstand!” He accidentally shouted back before clamping a hand over his mouth. If he was too loud and woke up the others, it could signal the beginning of the Great War of Girls.

“So did you end up falling asleep here after using the bathroom or something?”

“I—I wonder?” She seemed just as confused as him, apparently not remembering anything that had happened. “Like I said last night, I sleep like a rock once I nod off…”

“Isn’t that a problem if you have to pee?”

“I—I haven’t had that problem since I was ten!”

“That’s really late.”

Fey turned bright-red and tried to explain. A pained expression flashed across his face.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just remembered a bad dream.” He forced a smile, avoiding her concerned gaze. He wasn’t about to tell a stranger that the girl in his dream hadn’t stopped wetting the bed when she died.

Why did I dream about that now…?

Maybe sleeping in a more modern concrete building was making him more nostalgic about his time on Earth. Or maybe the ghosts in the tomb had him wondering if she could’ve become one, too.

There’s no way.

He immediately shot that thought down. And it wasn’t because he loved science.

She was a dumbass and a good person. She wouldn’t have even thought about holding a grudge and haunting anyone.

“Shinichi?” asked Fey.

“The sun hasn’t even come up yet.” Again, he evaded Fey’s question, peeking out the window into the darkness. “It’s a bit early, but we’re already awake. I’ll go get the others. You make breakfast. You can just get the bread and water in the kitchen.”

“O-okay! You’ll love my fish pie!”

“…There’s not a single fish in there.”

“Oh, man!”

Shinichi went upstairs as Fey hung her head and headed toward the kitchen. Once he got upstairs, he poked and prodded himself in examination.

It doesn’t look like she stole anything or poisoned me.

He did have a headache when he woke up, but he couldn't find anything out of the ordinary. Even his headache had already gone away. It would have been a perfect opportunity to do something nefarious since everyone was asleep, but it seemed like she hadn't done anything. She must have really been walking around half-asleep.

Can she actually be a girl who dreams of being an explorer?

Thinking about her behavior and words, she didn't seem like an extremely dangerous person. Maybe he was just being too suspicious. But he couldn't shake the feeling he was falling for something as he went to wake up the other girls. They went downstairs and ate their fill of the bread and water prepared by Fey and then filed back to the Elven Tomb.

"I don't hear any golems this time," said Arian.

"It'd be great if those were the last ones," added Shinichi.

With Arian in the lead, they cautiously explored the second basement floor. However, they still didn't find anything of interest. The third basement floor was practically the same. When they reached the fourth basement floor, they were starting to wonder if the trip had been a waste of time. But its layout was different. This time, they found themselves facing a round metal door.

"This looks promising," Shinichi acknowledged.

The door made him think of a vault in a bank since it seemed unnecessarily heavy and strong. He walked up to the door, heart thumping in anticipation.

"It's locked. And we need…to crack a combination lock to open it." He gripped the rusted dial, managing to get it to turn, though he couldn't see the numbers on it. It wouldn't serve much use. "Now would be a good time to pry it open."

"I might be able to. It should be fine. There's no *Protection* spell on it." Arian had a crooked smile as she drew her magic sword, but Shinichi put up a hand to stop her.

"Before we do that, could you check for any traps, Celes?"

"Understood," replied Celes, casting *Clairvoyance* and inspecting the door in detail. "There is nothing suspicious, as far as I can see. This appears to be a library."

"Seriously?!" said Shinichi.

"Would you like to take a look?" Celes took Shinichi's hand, using *Link* to share the information with him.

He saw a large room packed full of bookshelves. "Whoa! Most of the books are totally falling apart, but there are some in good condition!"

"R-really?!" said Fey in surprise. She grabbed Celes's other hand, cheeks flushing when she saw all the ancient books. "A-amazing! This is a *huge* discovery! W-we need to get in there!"

"I'll take care of that." Arian smiled as she readied her sword. At that moment, Shinichi suddenly felt a question nagging in the back of his mind.

Wait. The metal forklift had been rusted away to almost nothing, and the concrete walls are cracked. How would paper books remain relatively untouched?

But before the answer came to him, Arian had slashed the giant metal door.

"Hi-yah!"

In the span of a breath, she cut through the round door four times to make a square opening. Pieces of the door launched out, and a shower of broken paper scraps fluttered around her.

"What?!" cried Arian.

"Shit!" shouted Shinichi, realizing his mistake a moment too late.

"Wh-what was that?!" asked Fey.

"Oh no! The books are all in bits and pieces!" said Rino upon frantically looking into the vault with Fey.

Tens of thousands of books had been reduced to paper scraps in the air.

"I'm incredibly sorry. This is my fault for failing to discover the trap," said Celes.

"No, Celes. This wasn't a trap," Shinichi consoled, trying to cheer up the maid as she hung her head dejectedly. He was angry at himself for having let the lure of treasure hurry him to action instead of thinking things through. "I should have realized it when I saw that the books were in decent condition compared to the rusted metal. This vault had been filled with an inert gas."

"A *what*?" asked Rino.

"A gas that prevents things from rotting," explained Shinichi.

Inorganic materials like metal broke down from a chemical reaction to oxygen in the air. If objects were stored in an inert gas with low oxygen levels, they didn't break down as quickly.

"There was a difference in pressure between the vault filled with the inert gas and the atmosphere outside. That caused it to blow out," he continued.

A large volume of the gas must have been pumped into the vault. Before they cut the door, it was almost like a balloon. They could have found a method to slowly release the gas if they had just taken their time, but they'd chosen to force their way. That caused all the gas to burst out at once, and the force destroyed the books.

"But based on the way these books exploded, I'm guessing they were already totally decayed on the inside," observed Shinichi.

Even though it was filled with inert gas, that didn't mean there was no oxygen in the vault. For example, there was no way for them to remove the oxygen trapped between the pages of the books. The pages would've decayed slowly over thousands of years to the point where a light touch would make them crumble to dust.

“But I really screwed up,” he said, regretting his decision deeply. As long as the books had maintained their shape, there was a chance they could have fixed them with magic.

“I-I’m sorry, I rushed you…,” said Fey.

“No, there wasn’t another way to get into the vault anyway. There’s nothing we could have done. Let’s just move on,” he said, trying to cheer up Fey who was bowing so low in apology that her head was about to reach her knees.

He stepped into the vault, which was covered in a blanket of paper. The party broke up to see if they could find any books that happened to survive. Instead of a book, Shinichi found small boxes displayed near the wall.

“Is this plastic?” Shinichi went and picked one up to examine it.

It had yellowed and deformed, but the smooth material was a familiar synthetic resin. He wasn’t surprised, since he’d already found a forklift and an elevator in this place. But his eyes opened wide when he opened the box and saw its contents.

“Cassette tapes? And is this a floppy disk?”

He knew these things existed, but he had never used the old-school media format himself. These had been preserved with the books in the inert gas.

“The data…doesn’t seem readable.”

The cases of the cassettes and floppy disks were intact but the magnetic tape and disks inside had to be past their life span. Right next to them was a machine that appeared to be a computer to read the disks, but it wouldn’t start. Shinichi assumed its insides were corroded away and gave up, but he did have one question.

“Did cassette tapes and floppy disks always look like this?”

In the past, there was an industry war for the next new storage medium. That meant the different mediums were not compatible with one another, causing users great heartache. It also meant Shinichi might not be familiar with all their available shapes and sizes.

But even when he took that into consideration, these cassettes and disks were stark contrasts to those used on Earth.

Shinichi saw there were some very faint characters on the labels, which were in the elven language that he’d seen yesterday. He let out a huge sigh of relief as soon as he realized that.

“This isn’t Earth. This really is another world,” he said to himself.

“What was that?” Arian had been searching nearby and happened to hear his voice.

Shinichi turned a little red in embarrassment but explained his worries. “I’d been considering the terrible possibility that this wasn’t another world but Earth in the future.”

“Hmm. Why?”

“Well, there was a forklift and elevator, which we’ve made on Earth using science.”

Maybe after Shinichi had been summoned, Earth had been destroyed by this calamity, all the scientific advances had been lost, and very few people had survived. The survivors could use a new power—magic—bestowed to them by the calamity. A new world was made, one completely different from the scientific society of the past. That eventually became this world of Obum, and Shinichi hadn't originally been summoned across the divide between different worlds. He'd really just been transported from the past to the future.

At least, that was the possibility that'd been running through his mind.

"Logically, it's impossible, considering the story about how Obum originally was one large continent that split into three, since it's inconsistent with Earth."

But that was a legend. It could have been a lie, which meant he could get it to fit his theory.

However, this physical evidence in the form of preserved storage mediums dissolved his doubts. They were different from Earth in form and in the language on their labels. There was no doubt this was a different world than his own.

"On top of that, I can assume this wasn't Earth in the twenty-first century, since we use flash drives and optical disks. I'm just happy it didn't turn into a *Planet of the Apes* type of situation."

"I don't really understand, but I'm happy you're happy!" Arian broke into a smile. She didn't follow his explanation, but it gave her some relief to see him this way.

Shinichi smiled back and then looked at the cassette tapes again.

"The technical advancements of the ancient civilization are eons ahead of the rest of this world. But it's not as far along as Earth."

Even if he combined the data from all the cassettes and floppy disks on the shelf, it wouldn't come close to the amount of data in the smartphone in Shinichi's pocket.

"But some aspects are far past Earth, like the golem security guard." But that must have only been possible with the use of magic, not science. "It would seem the existence of magic results in slower technological advancements."

Because of the existence of *Healing* spells, the medical sciences hadn't made much progress, including pharmacology and surgery. This ancient civilization had magic at its disposal, which was all too convenient. It was safe to assume its technology advanced slower than it could have.

While Shinichi was talking, they heard Rino's voice call for them from farther in the library.

"Shinichi, can you come here?"

"What is it?" He set down the cassettes, jogging over to her to find Rino and Celes had dug a large case out from under the mountain of scrap paper.

"We found something that looks like a treasure chest," said Rino.

"Great, well done."

“Hee-hee, I was just trying to be helpful.” She giggled as he gently patted her head and knelt to examine the silver box.

“Your treasure chest is an aluminum case,” he said. It resembled the kind that you might use to transport a camera. Regardless, there had to be something of value hidden in there.

“Wh-what do you think is in there?” said Fey, coming over to join them, her eyes curious.

“I used *Clairvoyance* to look inside, but it appears there is another smaller box within this box,” said Celes.

“I hope it’s not like those Russian nesting dolls,” replied Shinichi with a wry smile as he continued to examine the box and found a plate attached to the top of it.

“‘Here lies proof we lived,’ huh,” said Shinichi.

“Huh?” asked Rino.

“It’s written here.” He pointed to the elven characters engraved into the plate.

“Y-you can read ancient languages?!” cried Fey.

“I practiced yesterday,” he said, reaching for the clasps as Fey stared at him in admiration.

“Is it a good idea to open it?” asked Celes, still thinking of the inert gas incident from earlier.

“No idiot would put a trap on something they left behind to be discovered one day,” replied Shinichi with a reassuring smile as he undid the clasps. The lid was almost stuck, and the moment he opened it, the air around them seemed to flow into the box.

“Vacuum packed. They were really careful.”

He peeked inside. Just as Celes had said, he saw another, smaller box, which he removed and carefully lifted its lid to find eight books and one letter. He first opened and read the letter, confirming that his assumption about the tomb was correct.

“I was right. This was an underground shelter built by an ancient civilization.”

“A shelter?” asked Rino.

“Yeah, a place to hide from the calamity—a massive asteroid.”

By the time Rino had read him the legends about the demon world, he had made this guess.

He wouldn’t have been too surprised if the Evil God had actually fallen from the sky, since anything was possible in a world with magic and the existence of the Goddess. But when he thought about things that fell from the sky and destroyed worlds, an asteroid was at the top of the list.

“Shinichi, what’s a *shelter*? What’s an *asteroid*?” asked Rino.

“Oh right, let’s start with asteroids.”

It wasn’t only her. Everyone was looking at him in confusion. He realized he’d have to explain it using simple terms.

“Asteroids are massive rocks that fly through outer space. They’re like the moon, sort of.”

“A rock as big as the moon…,” said Rino, her face pale from fear.

“The moon is kept in place with gravity and centrifugal force, but that’s not the case with asteroids. In their case, gravity causes the asteroid to speed up. It can crash into the planet at a speed of dozens of miles per second.”

At heart, the scheme with the pillars near the elves’ village was the same principle, but the scale and destructive force was a world of difference with an asteroid.

“When an asteroid strikes a planet, the area of impact is engulfed by a sea of flames as a result of a large explosion, causing earthquakes and floods throughout the world, destroying every city. On top of that, the shock kicks dirt and debris into the air, blocking out the sun’s light and throwing the world into an extended winter.”

“A disaster causing a long winter…,” repeated Celes. She must have been unable to imagine the scale of the devastation as it didn’t seem to click in her mind.

If Shinichi hadn’t watched simulations of these disasters on TV or the Internet, he might have had trouble imagining it, too.

“Anyway, the entire world would be devastated by the asteroid. The long winter would turn the surface into an environment unsafe for people to live in.”

There was a similar time period recorded in the church’s holy book, even though they changed the calamity into the army of the Evil God.

“This shelter was built as an underground evacuation center, as a place to hide from the world’s destruction,” finished Shinichi.

“An underground evacuation center?” asked Rino.

“You know how the demon god brought everyone beneath the surface to escape the calamity? It’s the same thing.”

“Oh, I see!” Rino finally got it.

This shelter was smaller and more shallow than the demon world, but it could be used to ride out the first stages of the disaster.

“But there’s a problem. Even if they survived the earthquakes and tsunamis by staying underground, they had to overcome the long winter. It would have taken hundreds of years before people were able to live on the surface again.”

“They had to live here all that time? It must have been hard. I bet they were hungry.” Rino pressed her hands to her stomach, imagining what it must have been like.

Shinichi smiled at her before looking back at the letter. “You’re right. There wasn’t enough food for them to live for years in the underground shelter. That’s why they used a certain piece of equipment.”

“What?” asked Rino.

“I think it’ll be easier to explain if we go downstairs and see it.” He slid the letter into his breast pocket and took out the eight books preserved within the case. Shinichi carefully flipped through a few of the pages, but they were in perfect condition. He saw no yellowing pages or any damage from bugs.

“Great, everything is still intact.” Unlike the rest of the books in the vault, these ones must have been made with paper and ink with a particularly long life in mind. He didn’t have time to sit and read through each of them, so he went to put them in his backpack, but Fey hesitantly stopped him.

“Th-they look heavy. Would you like me to carry half?”

“Maybe…,” he murmured as he thought for a moment.

There was a chance they would still need to fend off the elves or more ghosts. That meant Arian and Celes needed to keep themselves unburdened, and he didn’t want to ask Rino to carry the heavy books since she was so small. He could carry them all himself, but if there was an accident or if he were attacked, all the books would be in danger. It would be safer to divide them up. That said, Shinichi still didn’t entirely trust Fey, so he checked the titles of each of the books and gave her the four that seemed of lesser importance.

“Sure. Could you take these?”

“O-of course! Thank you. I—I get to carry an ancient manuscript!” she said, shaking in excitement as she slid the books into her own bag.

All of them were titled *A History of the Anticum Empire* and seemed to be a detailed history of the civilization that built this shelter.

I’m really interested in reading those, but I don’t think they’re related to our objective.

With a series of strange events, it would have been easy for them to forget their original mission: They had actually come to the Elven Tomb to find information related to the Goddess Elazonia’s identity. It was unlikely that the Goddess, with a stranglehold on the entire Uropeh continent, would only appear in the history of one country as a minor god.

These are our best leads.

The four books in Shinichi’s possession had titles like *A World History* or *Myths and Religions of the World*, making them much more likely to hold the key to their puzzle.

“Right, I think we’ve actually achieved our goal with this room. Let’s go downstairs and take a look anyway.”

As the group walked out of the library vault, Shinichi counted his blessings, thankful for the ancient people who took the time to preserve these valuable resources.

When they made their way down to the fifth basement floor, they found themselves facing another heavy metal door. Unlike the one in the fourth-floor library, this one was left ajar.

“Did someone come here before us?” asked Rino.

“No, I think they probably forgot to close it on their way out,” replied Shinichi as she walked through the door.

Cool air flowed through the room. It had the same structure as the floors above, forming one massive room with no ornamentation. The only difference was that this room was lined with hundreds of large metal boxes shaped more like beds than bookshelves.

“Th-they’re a little creepy. They look like coffins,” stammered Fey.

“Exactly right,” said Shinichi.

“Wh-what?!” She trembled in fear as Shinichi walked up to the closest box. There was a transparent glass window on the top half.

Shinichi wiped away the dust and peered in.

“……”

He stared silently in for a moment, then closed his eyes and brought his hands together in prayer.

“What’s in there?” asked Rino, running over in curiosity and peeking inside. She locked a stare with a pair of empty eye sockets. “Ack! Th-there’s a person in there!”

She was so surprised, her legs almost gave out from under her, but Celes supported her and saw it for herself.

“The ears are long. This is an elf, not a human,” she observed.

“A-are they alive…?” asked Fey timidly.

“No. It looks saponified,” answered Shinichi, moving on to the next box and observing what was inside.

That one appeared dried and mummified. There were differences in the preservation of their bodies, but almost all the approximately six hundred boxes housed an elven body.

“It *is* called a tomb. I’m not surprised there are dead bodies, but why are they so well-preserved?” asked Arian.

In their culture, they buried their dead without any alterations to the body. Some places practiced cremation or burials at sea. She’d never heard of anyone bothering to preserve the body. She found the culture of the ancient elves very hard to understand, but Shinichi explained the situation to her, expression serious.

“This place wasn’t originally a tomb. It was an artificial hibernation facility.”

“Artificial…hibernation?”

“Well, you know what hibernation is, right? It’s when bears sleep through long winters.”

“Yeah.”

“These people tried to recreate that to sleep through the long winter caused by the asteroid. That’s what this was for,” explained Shinichi, indicating one of the boxes that contained the elves.

A common setup in science fiction stories involved people using low temperatures to prevent the body’s decay while they took a one-way journey to a far-off destination. It seemed this ancient civilization had created the means to do that.

“However, it appears their long nap turned into an eternal rest,” said Celes.

“Yeah, about that…” Shinichi grimaced, taking out the letter from his breast pocket.

It essentially detailed the fact they had constructed an underground shelter and would enter hibernation. In the letter, they were leaving proof of their existence in case it didn’t go to plan, hoping people in the future or even intelligent life visiting from outer space might find it.

“They hurried to finish the equipment because the asteroid was coming, but there was a chance the equipment would fail. However, we can’t discount the possibility that it succeeded,” he said, looking in another one. The elf inside was completely dead. “Arian, could you cut the bottom for me?”

“I could, but are you sure it’s okay?”

“Yeah. The elf and the equipment are both completely dead.”

“All right. Hi-yah!” she yelled, slicing the bottom of the box while trying to avoid the body inside. Shinichi investigated the equipment, seeing a number of cables and circuit boards. In the very center, he saw a few familiar crystals.

“Magic conductors. So it did use magic.”

There’s no way a society that relied on floppy disks would be able to accomplish artificial hibernation through science alone, since it was something they still hadn’t been able to accomplish on Earth. Just like the golem’s gun, this piece of equipment was a combination of magic and science.

“People always quote Arthur C. Clarke when they say ‘any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,’ but I wonder what he’d have to say about this equipment, where sufficiently advanced technology and magic came together.’” Shinichi was unable to sort out his complicated emotions, but he was able to confirm his theory was correct.

“It actually didn’t matter if they were hibernating or if they were preserving dead bodies. This equipment would resurrect them.”

Magic conductors weren’t just something you could store magic in. If you repeatedly cast the same spell onto a magic conductor, you could create an “imprint” of that spell, which would activate simply by adding magic into the conductor at a later time. In other words, they prepared separate magic conductors, ones to supply magic and ones to cast *Resurrection*. Attach

some sort of timer, even a mechanical one, and the person inside could be woken up at a predetermined time in the future.

“But the magic conductor can’t retain a magical charge for that long. They must have improved it somehow,” he continued.

When he looked closely, the color of the magic conductors in the chamber was different from the natural ones he’d seen so far. The ancient elven society must have used its advanced magic and technology to develop a new type of magic conductor. Like grounding preventing electrical discharge, it prevented magical discharge.

“But there’s no magic left…”

None of the crystals in the equipment had any of the glitter indicating they were full of magic. They were all empty.

The elf is still dead. Why has it run out of magic? The new magic conductor must not have been the best at storing magic, huh…

He stared inside, wondering, and motioned for Arian to come and join him.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Can you cut out one of these magic conductors for me?” he asked.

“I dunno… I’m starting to feel like a grave robber…”

“Huh. We’re not *like* grave robbers. We *are*.”

“That’s nothing to brag about!” snapped Arian in frustration as Shinichi puffed out his chest.

Fey also voiced her objections. “M-master Shinichi. An explorer shouldn’t stoop to being a grave robber!”

“Fine. Gimme those books in your bag.”

“…I—I guess exploration comes with its own sacrifices.”

“Heh-heh-heh. You get it,” he replied.

“Yet another person poisoned by Shinichi.” Arian sighed as she watched Fey give in to her desire to explore, even if she had to sacrifice her morals.

The hero slid her sword into the artificial hibernation chamber to cut out a fist-size magic conductor. Shinichi wrapped the crystal in a handkerchief and placed it in his backpack before pointing at the body inside the chamber.

“Celes, can you resurrect them?”

She thought for a moment before shaking her head. “No. I think I would be able to return the body to its original state, but it would be a soulless doll.”

“I thought as much,” replied Shinichi, hanging his head. “I imagined you might be able to bring back the physical body with their DNA. But the mind? Their brain? It won’t be so simple.”

Even though this was a magical world, Shinichi hadn’t seen any evidence of souls. That would just be all too convenient for his mission. A *soul* was nothing more than activity between the person’s neurons.

The elven body in front of them might be well-preserved on the outside, but the brain inside must have looked like melted wax. All its memories

were lost. Even if they were to resurrect the body, it would be nothing more than a living doll. Celes was right.

“But they would have had a way to resurrect the mind along with the body…,” he insisted.

After all, they were talking about an ancient civilization advanced enough to create this complex of a magical machine. This should have been an issue they brought up earlier. They wouldn’t have put six hundred elves into artificial hibernation if they didn’t have some solution for it.

“Besides, it had to have worked for some people,” he continued, glancing around again at all the hibernation chambers.

The vast majority were closed and gathering dust. Only ten of them were opened with no bodies inside.

“If they’re empty, does that mean some elves resurrected?” asked Arian.

“Yeah. Clarissa’s ancestors. The ones who founded the elves’ village,” answered Shinichi.

“What?!”

It was the most obvious answer.

“The elves in the village are very knowledgeable because they’re from an ancient civilization. Well, their knowledge has deteriorated compared to way back when.”

There was no way ten survivors could have possessed all the knowledge of the ancient civilization, even with their brains intact. Plus, they must have had their hands too full from cultivating the forest and creating the infrastructure for their new lives to hand all of it down to their children.

But that brought him to a question: Why didn’t the elves come back and open the vault to the library?

Instead of accessing the most important information from the past, they sealed it up tightly enough that even they couldn’t enter, let alone some other enemy.

The rate of success is too low if only ten out of six hundred people came back from the artificial hibernation.

Even if this rushed development was their only hope, it was too big of a risk if the chance of success was 1.7 percent. The living spaces above indicated they didn’t need to go into hibernation as soon as the asteroid hit. It would have taken a few months for them to run out of food, time they could have used to improve this piece of equipment.

And why didn’t the resurrected try to save the others?

This whole thing meant there was a way to revive the brain. If the resurrected had utilized that method on their sleeping brethren, they would have been able to save more elves. But that didn’t seem to be the case. They just left the bodies there and sealed the shelter closed.

Does that mean it wasn’t an accident, like a defect in the machines?

Shinichi felt a chill run down his spine, scanning the room. This floor held nothing other than the quiet rows of coffins that one would expect to find in a tomb. There had to be something else hiding below.

“Let’s keep going,” said Shinichi.

“Are we going to leave the elves here?” asked Rino.

“I’d like to bury them, but we don’t have time.”

“…Okay.”

Shinichi nudged her from behind, and they went to leave the room, heading to the final basement floor.

At the bottom of the long stairway was a space about as big as a school gym. On the left side of the room was a pile of rusted metal that looked like an electrical generator. On the right was a fifty-foot-tall magic conductor, towering over them with a blue-white light.

“Looks like a power room,” said Shinichi.

The electricity and magic necessary for keeping the shelter operating were all in its confines.

“And there’s still magic left—,” he started to say, but before he could finish, the light started to seep out from the magic conductor.

It formed into the shape of a person’s arm, blasting faster than an arrow toward the person with the largest amount of magic in the room: Rino.

“Ack?!” she yelped, frozen in place.

“W-watch out!” cried Fey, immediately jumping forward to wrap her arms around Rino.

Fey was left defenseless as the arm threatened to pierce through her to get to Rino, but Arian sliced it off with her magic sword.

“Are you okay?!” asked Arian.

“I’m fine. Are you all right, Fey?” replied Rino.

“I-I’m okay, b-but…,” stammered Fey, pointing a shaking finger at the magic conductor.

The sliced arm pulled back as if giving up, but in its place grew hundreds of blue-white appendages, crawling out of the magic conductor.

“It’s like the Thousand-Armed Kannon…,” murmured Shinichi.

But Kannon was a merciful bodhisattva who saved people. This was the exact opposite. It was an amalgamation of dead spirits, aiming to steal magic by killing the living. It feared fading from existence; it would do anything to continue existing, even without any purpose or will. As proof, hundreds of faces appeared from the magic conductor, faces twisted and terrifying.

“”“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH—!”””

The faces let out a collective shriek that froze the hearts of the living. Their cries embodied jealousy and fear of eternal destruction.

“A *legion* of souls…,” muttered Shinichi, looking at the terrifying mass of the dead. A shiver ran up his spine, but he understood now. “This is what killed the elves, and it is also the dead elves themselves.”

During the artificial hibernation, an elf must have turned into a ghost. Even though the elf knew they had been promised resurrection, it didn't change the fact that they were dead. The magic in their body must have started to move on its own, fearing complete annihilation. To keep itself alive, it fed on the closest sources of magic: the elves sleeping in artificial hibernation and the magic conductors holding magic for *Resurrection* someday. The companions turned into ghosts themselves, joining the first elf to perish before eventually turning into this legion.

"That explains why only a few elves were resurrected and why they didn't have time to open the library vault," Shinichi guessed.

The few elves lucky enough to wake from the hibernation must have fled for their lives, running from the giant mass of magic that had devoured the rest of their kind. They sealed the underground shelter to prevent the monster from escaping and then built the village nearby to monitor the shelter while they waited for its magic to run out and for it to succumb to weakness.

But there was one problem: The legion had possessed the towering magic conductor in the power room and the security golems—all in an attempt to avoid its demise. And it stayed there for all this time until their new prey arrived. Now.

"""AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH—!"""

A group of hands stretched toward them, toward the food it had been denied for hundreds of years. Unfortunately, Shinichi's team wasn't a helpless prize for it to pick off.

"Hah!" cried Arian, jumping with her sword.

"Slice it to pieces. *Edge Whip*," Celes chanted.

Their collective efforts severed many of the encroaching hands. The legion didn't have the intelligence to make skilled attacks. It rushed directly at them. Hacking off its arms was easier than shooting fish in a barrel. However, no matter how many arms they severed and sliced, they just kept coming without slowing down.

"*Tsk.* This should be working…," said Celes.

"But this will never end!" cried Arian.

Arian and Celes would run out of strength before the legion could deplete its magical power. When Shinichi came to that conclusion, he picked up Rino who was frozen in fear and shouted to the others.

"Okay! Let's run away!"

"What?!" cried Arian in surprise.

"Hold back our enemies. *Fortress*," said Celes, creating a wall of light that stretched across the entire room. They all hurried up the stairs while the legion was held back.

"Shinichi, should we really run away?!" Arian asked hesitantly. It was around when they had made it back up to the fifth basement floor.

"Well, there's no real need to fight it."

"…Oh," said Arian in a pathetic tone. That hadn't even occurred to her.

She had let herself get swept away by the feeling of being in a boss battle against an amalgamation of evil spirits at the bottom of a huge dungeon, but she really didn't need to fight against it. They had no obligation to defeat it.

"We have what we came for, and I'm happy that I figured out the mystery of the tomb. Let's leave," Shinichi insisted.

"You are so selfish." Celes looked exasperated, but she began reciting the incantation for *Teleport*.

But Rino stopped her. "Wait, please. Won't people be in danger if we leave the evil ghost here?"

"Ack…" Shinichi was lost for words when Rino hit the nail on the head.

The legion housed the magic of the overpowered elves—hundreds of them, at that. If it ever escaped the tomb, it could result in the deaths of countless humans and animals in the area. What it had in power, it didn't have in intelligence. If the elves gathered the whole village together, they might be able to defeat it, but they wouldn't make it out of the battle without casualties.

"And the ghost's faces looked really glum," continued Rino, shifting her eyes to her feet as she remembered the twisted expressions on the legion.

Without any form of intelligence, the legion had lost its sense of self, but its faces showed that it continued to fear death, continued to feel pain forever.

"Shinichi," she pleaded, "you said it's an act of kindness to help them move on to the next world."

"…I guess we have no choice," said Shinichi, holding his hands up in a show of surrender to her tearful entreaty. "If we succeed, the elves will owe us big time. I guess we're going ghost hunting."

"Thank you so much!" cried Rino happily as she wrapped her arms around him. He stroked her head gently, but his mind was turning at full speed.

"But it's going to be dangerous to fight it," he said.

Only Arian and Celes were capable of fighting against it. They would need the Demon King's assistance if they even wanted a chance at winning. But that posed another problem: They were on the far easternmost point of the continent and the Demon King's castle was in the far west. Even if Rino supplied Celes with magic, they could only *Teleport* that distance once per day. If they came back with the Demon King, they'd need at least a day to recover their magic. The legion could cause a lot of damage in that time.

"If we have to fight it with what we have on hand, then there's only one way…," he said.

There was an obvious way to defeat the legion, but it required a huge sacrifice. As Shinichi mulled it over, his gaze naturally shifted over to Fey.

"Wh-what are you—? *Oh.*" She finally realized what Shinichi's plans were. Her eyes were as big as saucers, and her face went pale, but she

nodded, a pained grimace on her face. “I-it is hard to abandon my dream of being an explorer, but I can’t trade it for people’s lives.”

“…Okay. Let’s do it,” said Shinichi. He felt like his heart would break, but he readied himself and started up the stairs again to the fourth basement floor, which housed the library vault.

“What exactly are you going to do?” asked Arian.

“Just going to reuse an old strategy.” Shinichi placed a hand on one of the large pillars supporting the ceiling. “I’m going to destroy the shelter and make it cave in on top of the legion. You showed me that physical attacks work on ghosts.”

“That’s like…,” started Arian.

He’d used the same method when he destroyed the Cathedral of Boar Kingdom and saved her from Hube.

“It really sucks. This is a precious piece of history and a collection of advanced technology. But Fey’s right. I can’t trade people’s lives for it,” he said.

“That’s not what I would expect from the person telling us to run away,” Celes added.

“Ha-ha-ha, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” replied Shinichi, playing dumb and taking Rino’s hand. “I’m not strong enough on my own. Will you lend me some magic?”

“Yes!” she replied with an energetic nod. After all, she was the one who had said they should defeat the legion. She closed her eyes and concentrated, supplying energy to Shinichi.

His veins felt like they were on fire. He did his best to withstand the heat and started to use magic to create the chemical composition.

“$C_7H_5N_3O_6$. Explode into a whirlwind of destruction! *Element Conversion!*”

He used Rino’s magic to turn the entire giant pillar into TNT, the explosive that had practically become the poster child of all explosives.

“Just two more pillars—”

“Shinichi!” called Arian as he wiped sweat from his forehead.

He looked back and saw a mass of flailing blue-white arms and faces rushing up the stairs and into the vault.

“It’s here already?!” he shouted.

He had hoped that it wouldn’t want to leave the magic conductor and would wait downstairs while they worked, but apparently, that was wishful thinking.

“You keep working! I’ll hold it back!” yelled Arian, leaping forward to buy them some time, but they probably only had a few minutes.

He needed to hurry up and finish this.

“Celes, set a timer on this pillar so it explodes in three minutes—in exactly one hundred eighty seconds.”

“Understood.”

“Fey, just to be safe, start counting to one hundred eighty. Don’t stop, no matter what,” he continued.

“O-okay!” she replied.

Everyone jumped into action to follow his orders.

“Set alight after one hundred eighty seconds. *Delay Fire*,” Celes chanted.

“One, two, three…,” counted Fey, starting as soon as Celes cast her spell on the pillar of dynamite.

Shinichi grabbed Rino’s hand and left the others behind to run to the next pillar. “Let’s go!”

“Count on me!” chirped Rino, happy that she could help him out. But there was a part of her that was nervous as she lent Shinichi magic to turn the second pillar into an explosive.

“Argh…!” cried Shinichi, feeling like he was being stabbed with hot needles. He wasn’t used to handling such large amounts of magic.

He glanced back and saw Arian somehow managing to hold back the legion by taking advantage of the narrow entrance to the vault.

“Last one!” he yelled and ran to the third pillar, gathering the last of his energy and casting the final spell.

Behind him was Celes, who had finished casting *Delay Fire* on the second pillar, and Fey, who had continued to count, as instructed.

“Okay, Arian, come here!” he shouted.

“All right!” she called back. She put the last of her strength into seven final attacks, cutting off a number of the legion’s arms before turning her back to run as fast as she could back to Shinichi.

She had intended to stop in front of them, but her feet slid on the scattered papers on the floor, and she crashed into Shinichi’s chest.

“Aaah!”

“You seem in a bit of a rush.” Shinichi managed to catch her and remain standing while Celes finished casting her spell on the final pillar.

She completed her last incantation as the legion rushed at them, scraps of paper whirling around it.

“Carry our bodies into the far corners of sky. *Teleport.*”

The party felt a faint sensation of vertigo as their bodies disappeared from the library. The legion’s arms in front of their eyes were replaced with the blue sky. They appeared high in the air above the ruins. Gravity started to pull them back down to the ground.

“Aaah?!”

“Fly.” Celes quickly cast a spell to stop them from falling.

All the while, Fey kept counting as instructed. She was just finishing.

“One hundred seventy-eight, one hundred seventy-nine, one hundred eighty.”

At that moment, the legion was standing in the library, having just lost its prey, and the three pillars that held up the roof detonated in a massive explosion. It might have stayed intact if it were right after the shelter had

been constructed, but as it was, it had been weakened by age over the millennia until it was close to collapsing on its own. It couldn't withstand the explosion.

The pillars on the fourth basement floor exploded, destroying the floor of the third. The second and first basement floors followed in an avalanche of concrete and dirt. Already weakened by the explosion, the legion was crushed without even an inch of space to move. The avalanche continued down, crushing the elves' bodies on the fifth basement floor before swallowing up the magic conductor on the lowest floor.

Obviously, Shinichi couldn't see all that from the sky, but they did see a huge crater form in the forest floor. A cloud of dust blew up, almost reaching them. They could assume the dead had finally been put to rest beneath the soil.

"Will the ghosts sleep peacefully now?" asked Rino.

"Thanks to you," said Shinichi, trying to let her know that it was all right to be proud as she glanced down sadly.

He didn't believe in heaven or an afterlife, but he did hope they would rest in peace. He put his hands together in a silent prayer, and the others joined him.

They landed on the edge of the crater once the dust had settled to make sure the plan had worked, but they didn't see any sign of the legion.

Even though there was no other way to get out of this mess, everything ended up going according to the Goddess's plan…

Shinichi was painfully lost in thought. Ironically, they had succeeded in destroying the Elven Tomb, a longtime goal of the church. But they were still an enemy of the church.

They must have wanted to destroy it to erase any clues about the ancient civilization and the Goddess Elazonia.

At first glance, the pieces of technology in the underground shelter might not have appeared to have any connection to the Goddess, but there did seem to be one thing in common.

Those artificial hibernation chambers… What if they really were able to preserve a person's memories?

Then, once the body had been resurrected, saved memories and information could be installed into the new brain. Ignoring any moral qualms, that would totally re-create the person who lived before.

Shinichi knew of a similar system.

The undying heroes can be resurrected, even if their bodies are completely destroyed. If that system is taking backups of the person's mind and body, it means the elves who made the artificial hibernation chambers possessed the same skills as the Goddess Elazonia.

He'd considered it before: What if there was a method to upload your mind and download it back into a clone of your body? But neuroscience hadn't advanced that far yet. The ancient civilization hadn't caught up to scientists of the twenty-first century, although they had to the twentieth

century. That would have given them enough background knowledge to come up with the same method.

And as long as you can imagine something, you can make it real in this world.

This world of Obum was different from Earth. It had a way of allowing people to alter reality to match their imaginations. That was the power of magic. Even if science couldn't save backups and administer installations of memories, that wasn't out of the realm of possibility with the use of magic.

In other words, if you had the knowledge from the ancient civilization and the power akin to the Demon King, you would be able to create a system of "undying heroes." Which means the Goddess Elazonia—

"Shinichi, look!" Arian was tapping him on the shoulder.

Shinichi glanced up as his thoughts were interrupted. He saw some familiar faces.

"Wh-wh-what did you people do?!" screeched Clarissa as she and her two friends appeared from the forest. "We heard a horrible noise coming from the village, prepared ourselves for dioxin poisoning, and came back, and…"

Her face was a complicated mixture of shock, fear, and anger. Even her friends looked confused.

"The dioxin thing was a lie," Shinichi told them calmly.

"Wh-what are you—? *Pff!* I already figured that out!" retorted Clarissa.

"You deserve an Ig-Nobel Prize for saving face," he said, beyond annoyed at the elf to the point where he started to feel sorry for her.

"Anyway, what is going on? This is where the tomb should be!"

"Heh. Well, since you asked…," he replied, looking at the gaggle of elves before overdramatically announcing, "we turned the Elven Tomb and its ghost into dust!"

"Really?!" cried Clarissa, her face lighting up.

It seemed the elves had continued to protect the tomb for fear of the legion and as a cultural heritage site.

"As you can see, the ghost has been destroyed. There's no longer anything tying you to this forest!" continued Shinichi.

"In other words…," started Clarissa hesitantly.

"You can go wherever you want and love whoever you want!"

""Oh, thank you!"" cried Clarissa's two elf friends as they fell to their knees in gratitude.

For so long, they had been charged with watching over the tomb, which meant they were unable to leave the village. They were each going to be forced to bear the children of some despicable man, simply because he was a distant relation. Obviously, they would appreciate the person who rescued them from that cruel fate, even if he happened to be a lowly human.

"You are all free. You could leave the continent of Uropeh to search for other elves, or I can set you up with one of the dark elves," offered Shinichi.

“I can’t believe you keep being so generous, even after we bullied you… Are you a god or something?” asked one of the elves.

“Well, he *has* called himself an apostle of a certain ‘god,’” said Celes as she looked pityingly at the elves who had been played.

With that, they had settled one issue, but Clarissa seemed determined to ruin the moment.

“Hold up a second. You’re making it sound all well and good, but you’re the criminal who destroyed a monument left behind by our ancestors!”

“You really don’t know when to quit,” grumbled Shinichi with a sigh, wishing she had kept her mouth shut.

Her friends shot her annoyed expressions.

“Clarissa, you’re right; but he was able to defeat a ghost that we had no hope of handling. He finally laid our ancestors to rest.”

“Yeah. Besides, you’re the one always complaining about how you’ll die all alone in this tiny village.”

“Um… Well, yeah! But it’s impudent for a lowly human to come in and finish the task given to the glorious elves!” tearfully retorted Clarissa.

“Are you a child?” said Shinichi, making up his mind as he watched Clarissa yell like a kid throwing a tantrum. “I could ignore you and leave, but it would be annoying if you tailed us to enact your revenge. Well, I guess I’ll just have to break your spirit and turn you into my slave. That way, you won’t get in my way a second time.”

“Ha! You’ve finally shown your true face, creep!” Clarissa was actually looking *happy* as if to tell him to show her what he’s got.

“Wait, Shinichi?!” cried Arian, grabbing Shinichi’s arm to stop him, but the Demon King’s advisor just flashed her his usual evil smile.

“It’s all right. I wouldn’t be violent to a girl.”

“…Which means you’re going to do something else?” asked Arian.

“You know me so well.”

“We’re together all day every day.” She smiled back before letting go of his arm.

He used his hand to pull the notebook out from under his jacket. He’d stored it there just in case. They were the pages he’d found under the mattress in the child’s room, the one in the house they’d stayed in last night.

Clarissa froze, color draining from her cheeks. “Wh-wh-why do you have that?!”

“So it’s yours, Clara,” he replied.

“—?!” Clarissa let out a silent shriek when he called her that.

“Is that your nickname for her?” asked Rino, sulking in misdirected jealousy.

But Shinichi grinned and tapped the notebook. “Not quite. Clara is the name of the main character in Clarissa’s novel.”

“Stopppp—!” shouted Clarissa, trying to drown out Shinichi’s explanation, but she was too late.

“Huh. Clarissa, you wrote a novel?!” asked one of her friends.

“Well, she *is* a bookworm. I mean, she even reads erotic novels,” said the other.

“Kill meeeeee!” she shrieked, her face burning as she fell to ground. Her little hobby had been discovered by her friends.

“She’s overreacting. All she did was write a novel for fun,” said Celes.

“And it’s a real work of art. It’s—,” started Shinichi, about to reveal the plot.

Clarissa pressed her forehead and hands to the ground and begged him to stop. “I will do whatever you want! Just please don’t tell them!”

“““…What the—?”””

Everyone—human, demon, and even the two elves—were shocked at the sight of Clarissa on the ground, begging. She was usually a big ball of pride. Shinichi was the only one who wasn’t surprised, curling up his lip and looking like he was having fun.

“Heh-heh-heh. Well, then. I want you to tell the other elves that you orchestrated all this so they won’t get angry at us.”

“…What?” Clarissa was frozen in confusion.

Shinichi rolled up the papers and smacked her on the head. “You desperately wanted to leave the village, which was why you recruited some humans to trick the elves to leave. Meanwhile, you destroyed the tomb to kill the ghost in their absence.”

“Like anyone would buy that—”

“Hmm? These two are the only ones who witnessed our interactions. If they agree to keep their mouths shut, you can easily weave your own truth,” interrupted Shinichi.

He guessed someone would use *Liar Detector* on the girls, but as Shinichi had already demonstrated, there were a number of work-arounds.

“Besides, no one wants to believe some lowly humans came and destroyed their precious tomb. They *want* to believe a fellow elf weaponized their intelligence to kill the ghost. Am I wrong?”

“Ugh…” Clarissa knew better than anyone that the elves were full of pride, and she understood what he was saying.

In the end, people didn’t care about the actual truth: What mattered was what they wanted to believe.

“Even if you’re run out of the village as a criminal, you’ll be free, which isn’t so bad, is it?” asked Shinichi, finishing explaining why they should cooperate with this plan.

When he glanced over, the other two elves’ eyes were cold and uncertain.

“I’m grateful for what you did in the tomb, but I’m not sure I want to take the fall for something I didn’t do…,” said one.

“Our families would hate us…,” added the other.

Even though they weren’t the happiest in the village, it was their home and housed their families. They weren’t prepared to throw that all away.

Shinichi gave them a gentle offer. “How about I throw in something other than the dark elves? I *could* introduce you to incubi who are innocent on the streets and beasts in the sheets.”

“‘We’ll do whatever you want!’” They dropped to their knees. It looked like their hometown and family were immediately forgotten in favor of cute boys.

“…This is hard for me to say, but I wish you resisted just a little more,” said Shinichi.

“…Have you ever had someone order you to eat something off the floor? Because when I gave a birthday cake to the only young man in the village, that cocky bastard threw it on the floor and demanded that I clean it up with my mouth,” said one.

“…Have you ever had someone count down the days until you turned eighteen? Because my husband was decided before I was born, and this old geezer would whisper it in my ear every time I saw him,” added the other.

“I’m so sorry!” said Shinichi, throwing himself on the ground, too.

The two elves looked at him, foreheads dirty from touching the ground. Being on the edge of destruction had led to grimmer and darker customs than he’d thought.

“Anyway, it seems like these two are willing to cooperate. Then, if you label yourself as the criminal, the other elves are sure to believe the story,” said Shinichi as he stood up. He grabbed Clarissa’s head and forced her to lock her eyes with his from where she was prostrated on the ground. “Just imagine it: You deceived everyone for your selfish gains, collaborated with a disgusting human, and destroyed the precious tomb. Everyone would look at you with contempt and spit on you.”

“Argh…!” Clarissa’s cheeks tinged pink, perhaps from anger.

Shinichi smiled sadistically. “The girls would be happy about the situation. But what about the men?”

In this village, men were few and far between. Growing up, they were doted on like princes, and the young women would fight over them. They practically had their very own harems.

Before the population declined from basically inbreeding, the dark desires of the male elves must have played a part in sealing away the legion. They could have easily gotten the elves to band together and destroy it.

The village was paradise for the men. What would they think when they found out Clarissa was the one who had destroyed their little haven?

“None of them would touch you because you are closely related to everyone. But when they’re overcome with rage, they might not be so reasonable.”

“Ah…”

“They’d verbally abuse you: *It’s your fault!,* you know. *You’ll pay for this!* …Heh-heh-heh. It’d be just like your favorite erotic novels, huh?”

“Aaaaah—!” Clarissa let out a shriek, face still flushed as she shouted at him. “You are the dirtiest person I’ve ever met!”

“High praise,” he said, smiling easily at Celes’s favorite line.

Rino pulled on his arm, looking a little upset. “Shinichi, I feel bad for what you’re doing to Clarissa.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” he awkwardly assured, leaning down and whispering in her ear. “She likes to be teased. She’s a huge masochist.”

“What?!” Rino jumped back in surprise before taking a good look at Clarissa.

Her bright-red face made it seem like the elf was brimming with incredible anger. But on closer inspection, Rino could see that her mouth was curved up—very faintly. In fact, she was happy.

“…Is she really?” asked Rino.

She had a hard time believing it because Rino had seen Clarissa beat back the heroes and look down on humans.

For some reason, Shinichi had made the opposite observation.

“Why does she hate the masochistic heroes? Because she herself is one,” he explained.

It seemed contradictory to hate someone of the same nature, but she wanted a partner who would abuse and humiliate her. She didn’t want to be the one doing it. Like magnets, opposites were attracted when it came to sadism and masochism.

“I actually misread it for elven pride in the beginning, too,” admitted Shinichi.

Just because someone was aggressive didn’t mean they were automatically a sadist. In fact, her high-and-mighty attitude was basically like someone warning, *Don’t push me in!* in front of a pool of scorching water. She knew what would make people tick, and she wanted to push their buttons.

“If you think back, you’ll find that she’s said things along those lines,” said Shinichi.

“Really?”

“For example, when I offered to introduce them to dark elf men, she said ‘I don’t need someone like that,’ and refused the offer.”

Clarissa didn’t refuse out of her pride. She really didn’t want one of the “nice guys” Shinichi was offering. She wanted a man who would embarrass her.

On top of that, when she said, “I—I—I would rather bite off my own tongue and bleed to death than get impregnated by a barbarian!” I realized she stutters when she’s emotional or lying.

In other words, that was a lie. She wanted to be disgraced like the characters of her erotic novels, but all those details were too crude for him to explain to Rino. Besides, no one would believe his theories without hard evidence.

“That’s the proof there,” he said, poking Celes in the back, because he knew it’d backfire if he pointed it out himself.

She immediately understood and stared at Clarissa’s skirt with eyes that were colder than absolute zero.

“You’re wet, you smutty pervert,” Celes observed.

“I—I—I have no idea what you’re t-talking about!” stammered Clarissa, desperately trying to deny it. But all this shouting just made her more excited, and she yanked down the front of her skirt.

Her two friends took one look at her and stepped back.

“Yuck…”

“Ew…”

But their disgusted expressions were nothing more than praise to the masochist.

“Yeah, I don’t really understand…,” said Rino.

“It’s better that way,” replied Shinichi with a relieved sigh.

Arian brought her face close to his and whispered in his ear. “By the way, what was her story about?”

It was possible Clarissa was upping the ante, pretending she didn’t want her secret to be revealed and cementing an opportunity to get chewed out—which was basically what she wanted. Shinichi had hoped to keep it a secret until he’d broken Clarissa, and Arian couldn’t hold back her curiosity anymore. Shinichi took her hand and replied using *Telepathy* so the others couldn’t hear.

“It’s a self-insert romance between the main character, Clara, and a handsome prince, modeled after her ideal man.”

“Ugh…” Arian cringed.

But that wasn’t even the juicy part.

“In her small village, Clara doesn’t have any luck with romance. She decides to transfer to a school in a large city, where she happens to run into a hot guy. That isn’t totally absurd, but…”

Out of hatred for her own small village, Clarissa had written about the city, but she had never been to one. Her only reference was records left by her ancestors from the ancient civilization. That made the details unrealistic.

But that wasn’t the problem.

“The guy kisses her on the first day. On the second day, he forces himself on her. On the third day, she realizes she loves him, even though she hates him. Maybe it’s an issue with me; maybe this is something boys just can’t understand…”

“No, I’m a girl, and I definitely don’t get it.”

Some say sex can lead to love, but this story developed faster than a rocket in takeoff.

“On the fourth day, she meets some other hot guy, and he ties her up and does…ahem…stuff to her, but the first guy finds out on the fifth day and starts shouting at her. Like, ‘You wanted it, didn’t you?!’ And then he puts a collar on her and does…things to her, and…”

“*Where does her imagination come from?!*” cried Arian in her head. She couldn’t wrap her head around why someone would write that as an ideal romantic encounter, but Shinichi’s face was a mixture of expressions as he defended Clarissa.

“If you think about her environment, it’s really not that surprising.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she’s related to everyone. Being with her was dangerous, and all the men avoided her like the plague.”

From the perspective of the male elves, there was no reason to pursue Clarissa as a romantic partner since there were so many other women. The men wouldn’t give her the time of day.

Meanwhile, other than her two friends and family, the rest of the elves treated her like garbage since she couldn’t help them increase the population. She found respite in books because she was lonely. Her ideal prince developed into a man who would force his way past her shell and save her.

“From the erotic novels, she latched onto the concept of force, blowing it wildly out of proportion. Plus, she wanted people to pay attention to her. Combine those two, and you have a huge masochist,” explained Shinichi.

“I guess I get it when you put it that way…”

Arian could sympathize with Clarissa’s feeling of loneliness. After all, she had experienced the same thing for being a half dragon. Besides, Shinichi had pulled her into league with the demons, and she had been attracted to his forcefulness. She did sort of see its charm.

“I still don’t know what I think about that novel,” she admitted.

“*Yeah, I wish I hadn’t read it*,” said Shinichi. But it had been like an ominous grimoire, sucking him in and whittling away at his sanity with every page.

Arian thought about everything that Clarissa had gone through and called out to her in support. “Good luck.”

“What? Don’t take me for a fool!” Clarissa shouted back, almost as if to say Arian should have insulted her instead.

Everyone sighed at the elven masochist.

Intermission
A Day in the Life of the Demon King

While Shinichi's group was away, every demon in the Demon King's castle was confronting a big problem. There was only one source of their troubles: The Blue Demon King was wasting away from sadness in the absence of his beloved daughter.

"Ha-ha-ha, Daddy will read you a book," he chuckled in Rino's room where there was a doll resembling his daughter that the dvergr had made.

Through a crack in the door, Sirloin the pig-headed orc peeked inside to see his pathetic master reading a picture book to the doll perched on his knee.

"Oh no. His Highness has lost it. *Oink.*"

"*Squee…,*" replied his pet pig.

Kalbi the bull-headed minotaur suddenly stood up. "I can't watch this anymore! We have to do something. *Moo!*"

"But what can we do?" moaned Ribido the succubus.

Kalbi thought for a moment. "Oh, how about you use *Illusion* to make yourself look like Rino? You can cheer him up. *Moo.*"

"Oooh, that's a great idea. *Oink!*" grunted Sirloin excitedly.

But Ribido didn't seem to feel the same way. "It would be fun to have some daddy-daughter action, but I'm afraid to think about what would happen when the truth got out."

"No one said to take it that far! *Moo,*" protested Kalbi.

"Yeah! And she would never forgive you, even if His Highness did. *Oink.*" Sirloin trembled in fear, imagining her coming after them, too.

Kalbi suddenly had an idea. "I know who we can invite. *Moo!*"

"I totally forgot about that!"

"*Squeee!*" replied the pet pig, crying happily in agreement, but Ribido shot down the idea.

"But we don't even know their whereabouts."

"Somewhere in the demon world, at the very least. Something'll come up if we look. *Oink.*"

"We can get some help to send out telepathic messages saying: 'The Demon King is ill. Return ASAP or something.' *Moo.*"

"Out of the two, I think Lady Rino would respond to that message faster. *Oink.*"

"You talk like it's so easy," groaned Ribido, her beautiful face twisted with annoyance.

The only people who could *Teleport* to the demon world by themselves were the Demon King and Celes, but Ribido could manage to do it—if she got people to give her magic. That meant she was the one in charge of sending messages until Celes came back.

“I was supposed to go to the Tigris Kingdom tomorrow and go hunting with my brother.”

“Hunting for what? *Moo.*”

“Well, obviously, we’ll be finding virgi—”

“I won’t let you say it! *Oink!*” huffed Sirloin, cutting off the obscene answer, pushing the succubus’s back with a heavy sigh. “I’ll be happy to take over if you want someone to join you at night. Get going. *Oink.*”

“Hmm, I’m not sure your cute little sausage would fill me up…”

“Gah—*oink!*” Sirloin fell to the ground, hacking up blood after Ribido mercilessly destroyed his manly pride.

Kalbi couldn’t help laughing at the pathetic sight. “Hee-hee. That’s what you get. *Moo.*”

“I’m not sure a thirty-year-old virgin can talk,” said Ribido.

“Ack—*moo!*” Kalbi fell to the ground, spewing blood.

Ribido had savagely crushed his delicate heart, though the succubus didn’t seem interested in the two as she walked away.

“Well, I don’t want Celes to get mad at me later. I’ll just swing by the demon world for a bit.”

“*Squee,*” said the pet pig, waving a hoof and seeing her off. By then, the pig had grown to a wonderful six-and-a-half feet in length, using its body to carry the collapsed orc and minotaur to the infirmary.

“Yeah? Rino wants to marry Daddy? Ha-ha-ha… Ha…,” came the Demon King’s voice.

He was completely unaware of the commotion in the hallway, hunching over to cuddle the doll, a single tear rolling down his cheek.

Epilogue

Shinichi's team managed to get Clarissa to vow under *Geas* that she would cooperate. At first, she resisted, but that was just her using reverse psychology. With their business done, they left Cemetarium Forest.

"All right. To carry out our promise for the dark elven men, we need to get back to the castle…," started Shinichi.

He ended up looking at Fey who was both an ally and a potential risk. She'd learned too much about them, but he couldn't just kill her since Rino was there. That left him with only one option.

"I imagine you have some idea by now, but we are working with the Blue Demon King, the one who appeared in Dog Valley some time ago. I hope you don't mind, but you're going to have to come with us to his castle," he said, making clear she didn't have the right to refuse.

She nodded. "I-it'd be worse if you left me here."

"How so?"

"Y-you still have the other books. I haven't had a chance to look at them yet."

"Oh right," he said as she pointed to his backpack containing the books from the ancient civilization.

She was a real idiot—so insistent on chasing after her dream of exploring that she'd abandon her family and join a group of demons for an adventure. Going to the Demon King's castle was a nonissue.

"A-also, I think I'd like to explore the demon world someday…," she continued hesitantly.

"I know how you feel," said Shinichi.

He'd only heard about it. He was interested in the underground world.

"Okay, let's all go to the demon world for our next adventure!" exclaimed Rino, offering to be their guide.

But Fey looked confused. "R-Rino, are you…?"

"We haven't told you, huh? She's a demon, too. In fact, she's the Demon King's daughter."

"Wait. Whaaaaat?!" cried Fey, falling over, eyes almost popping out from shock.

The beautiful little girl resembled a human, but she was actually the princess of humanity's greatest enemy.

"I—I can't believe I spoke so casually to a princess! Please forgive me! P-please spare my life!"

"What's wrong?!" Rino cried back, surprised as Fey suddenly knelt on the ground and started begging for her life. Rino crouched down in front of her. "You're my friend. I would be sad if anything happened to you."

"A f-friend…?"

"Is that wrong?" asked Rino.

“N-no, I’m glad!” replied Fey, automatically giving in to the child’s sorrowful eyes.

The others watched the exchange with smiles on their faces.

“Rino, you’re getting more selfish,” praised Shinichi.

“I wonder whose influence that is,” sulked Arian.

“Let’s get going!” said Shinichi, forcefully changing the topic so Arian and Celes would stop glaring at him.

Celes sighed and drew a magic circle on the ground. “Lady Rino, my apologies. Could you supply me with some magic?”

“Yep,” replied Rino.

She joined hands with Celes, lending her magic to cast *Teleport*. Their vision was distorted, and they felt dizzy for longer than normal, but a moment later, they appeared in front of the familiar castle of the Demon King.

“We’re home,” called Rino. Her voice bounced through the castle.

They heard a door burst open followed by the appearance of the gaunt face of the Blue Demon King.

“M-my Rino! Is it really you? And this time, you’re neither a doll nor an illusion!”

“So you’ve been hallucinating,” observed Shinichi.

“Ooooh, Rinoooo—!” he cried, oblivious to Shinichi’s remark as he ran up to Rino, picking her up in a hug, tears and snot running down his face.

But the moment the unknown girl entered his sight, he stopped in his tracks. His feet carved grooves into the stone floor from the impact.

“…Who the hell are you?” he barked.

“Oh, this is an explorer—,” started Shinichi, surprised by the Demon King’s expression but trying to introduce Fey—

“Force.”

A tremendous blow pounded into their backs, sending them flying.

“Gah—!”

Both Shinichi and Celes coughed up blood, knocked all the way to the Demon King.

“Gn…!” Arian was the only one who was able to roll with the hit, managing to get to her feet with her magic sword drawn.

“What?” Rino was frozen in shock as chains of light wrapped around her body.

“How…?” whispered Shinichi as pain shot through him.

Considering the situation, Fey must have attacked them from behind, but Celes had guaranteed she had no more magic than a normal human. That was what had convinced him she wasn’t a threat and why he let her travel with them. But now that they were at the Demon King’s castle, she was giving off crashing waves of magic. They were so powerful that even he could feel them.

“How?! How are you—?!” Shinichi screamed, overcoming the pain to turn back and look.

There he saw both his answer and something impossible.

“Wait, what?” cried Fey, confusion on her bespectacled face.

She stared at her own stomach—to find a tangle of red symbols glowing there.

“A magic circle?” balked Shinichi.

It was similar to a magic circle for *Teleport* that contained spatial coordinates. From the circle spilled waves of magical energy, giving way to a white arm.

“Fey!” cried Rino. She seemed to know intuitively what would happen next.

She struggled against the chains of light that bound her, trying to stretch her hand out to Fey.

Fey looked back at her—at the friendship that lasted for twenty-four hours—before letting out a smile that was almost washed away by her tears.

“R-Rino, I—” Fey’s small body could no longer endure the power from the magic circle.

And then she split in two.

The magic waves pushed out blood and gore in all directions.

In the center appeared a shining figure. Her long golden hair blew gently even though there was no wind. She had a perfect figure that could even entrance other women. Her eyes were stunningly beautiful and cold. This was the woman that only two people in all history had ever seen in person but whose statue graced churches throughout the continent.

There was not a single person who did not know her name.

“Goddess Elazonia…”

She was the very entity who had created the undying heroes and warped the ways of the world. She was the one who’d forced the destruction of the demons. Everyone forgot to breathe for a moment as they looked at the blinding beams of light she emitted.

No way! I can't believe Elazonia would attack us like this!

Shinichi had considered the possibility that she would attack them directly, but he had never once considered the possibility that she would use a surprise attack by killing a human.

While everyone was frozen in shock, Elazonia wrapped a hand around Rino's neck, lifting her in the air.

"Ack—!"

"Release my daughter!" shouted the Demon King, radiating with magic and anger as his beloved daughter shrieked.

But Elazonia's face remained cold and calm, holding Rino in front of her like a shield.

"Would a foul demon dare order me?"

"Gah—!"

She squeezed her hand tighter around Rino's neck to show that she would snap it if they resisted. The Demon King could only grind his teeth in silence.

Rino desperately tried to call to her father. "Daddy… Fey…"

"Rino?"

"Hurry…! Save her!"

Though she had been torn in two and had drawn her last breath, he could resurrect her if her head remained unharmed.

Even though her own life was in danger, even though Fey had been the vessel that brought their enemy here, Rino was begging for him to save the life of the girl who she had promised to show around the demon world.

"Rino, your grace knows no bounds…!" cried the Demon King, tears of happiness running down his face. For a moment, his daughter made him forget where he was and what was happening.

However, Elazonia snorted and smiled coldly at the exchange. "How pathetic! To be deceived by that fake doll."

"Was Fey a doll?" asked Rino.

"You are a fool for not realizing," replied Elazonia, hitting Rino with an icy-cold glare. It was filled with scorn.

Then she raised her empty hand toward Fey to cast a spell. "Return to atomic dust. *Disintegrate.*"

Light blasted out of her palms and swallowed up Fey's dead body, breaking down the bonds between atoms, turning the body into tiny particles. What was left was a white dust, something destroyed thoroughly enough that it could never be resurrected.

"Feeey—!" shrieked Rino.

"Kneel before me, unless you wish the same fate upon your daughter," ordered Elazonia to the Demon King.

She continued to hold Rino in front of her like a shield as the girl sobbed and screamed. Not even the Blue Demon King could fight back.

“Curse you…!” spat the Demon King, grinding his teeth from humiliation. His jaw sounded like it would break.

He bent his massive legs to kneel.

As Celes watched, she overcame the pain in her back to swear at the Goddess.

“You clearly know no shame! You’re dirtier than Sir Shinichi!”

“A dark elf, huh? The one who betrayed humans and joined teams with the demons. You are the one who will know shame. *Hyper Gravity.*”

“Argh!” Celes’s body was smacked into the floor as the multiplied gravity yanked her down. Blood trickled out of her mouth.

“Celes?!” cried Rino again.

“Shut it. How irritating,” ordered Elazonia, squeezing Rino’s neck again.

“Gah…!” Rino gasped painfully for air, like someone drowning in the ocean.

That tore open old wounds in Shinichi, lighting a fire of rage within him, burning away his confusion.

How long was I going to sit there like an idiot?! Get ahold of yourself. Everything has turned to shit, but we haven’t lost yet!

“Demon King. Surrender to me, and I will let your little girl live,” threatened the Goddess.

Shinichi racked his brain.

There’s no reason to think she’ll keep her promise. She’ll finish off the rest of us as soon as she’s done with the King.

The Goddess never revealed herself in front of her believers, staying cloaked in mystery. But she had shown herself to Shinichi’s team. That alone was reason enough to kill them.

Shinichi decided that going along with the Goddess wasn’t an option, scrambling to think of an alternative solution.

The Goddess took Rino as a hostage. Why? Because she wouldn’t get out of a fight with the Demon King unharmed.

He was certain about that first guess.

Elazonia seemed to radiate more magic than the Demon King, but it didn’t feel like there was enough of a difference to put her in an entirely different league—one that would make the Demon King hesitate to fight her.

That means she can’t just kill Rino.

Rino couldn’t even match Shinichi in combat, for she hadn’t matured fully and possessed an empathy that was off the charts. However, she was the daughter of the Blue Demon King and the Blue Princess of War. Her small body housed the greatest magical potential of any demon.

She might have expended some magic when she helped with Element Conversion and Teleport. But there’s no way the Goddess could kill her if she redirected her magic into defense.

Even if the Goddess did manage to kill Rino, she wouldn’t be able to break down her atoms like she did with Fey. If Rino’s body was intact, then the Demon King or Celes could resurrect her.

But I don't want to make Rino go through that, even though I know she could be resurrected even if she died… That said, there's no other way out of this situation.

Shinichi was prepared for her to hate him. He opened his mouth to call out to her, but Elazonia seemed to have read his plans and cast a spell before he could say a word.

"Forge the ties between atoms and give new life. *Create Life*," she said.

The light from her palm swirled in front of Shinichi's eyes. It rippled around the stone of the floor, changing the atoms' arrangements to give birth to a life. It created a girl shorter than Rino with her shoulder-length black hair neatly trimmed. Her eyes and mouth were closed, making her look like a sleeping princess. She had none of the personality of that energetic dumbass. But there was no way Shinichi could forget that face, even though it'd been eight years since he last saw it.

"…Nozomi," whispered Shinichi.

The figure of the girl who'd drowned in the ocean looked exactly as she had at the time, collapsing into his arms. He instinctively wrapped his arms around her, feeling her warmth.

"Are…you alive?"

Her eyes were still closed, but her chest was rising and falling as she breathed, and he could feel the gentle beating of her heart.

"Impossible! Is that her?!" said Celes, knowing who it was.

"Who is that?!" asked Arian, clueless.

"……"

They called out to Shinichi, but his mind had gone blank. He couldn't reply. All he could do was sit there cradling the body of his childhood friend. There was no way the Goddess Elazonia was going to let the moment pass when she managed to render the person who acted as the brains of the operation powerless.

"Creating and destroying life is simple for me. When you finally understand, you will submit to me," said Elazonia. The hand on Rino's neck glowed with magical power.

"…I understand," said the Demon King, forcing the words from his lips after a moment's hesitation.

"Stop, don't—," shouted Shinichi, frantic even though he was still engulfed by confusion.

But Elazonia's gold, sparkling eyes pierced him. She delicately wagged a finger at him, as if to say, *I assume you don't want to lose that girl again*.

"—Ngh."

He would lose the warmth he held in his arms: His childhood friend would die again. Fear gripped his body like thorny vines.

And that moment of hesitation laid ground for this outcome.

"I, Ludabite, the Blue Demon King, submit to you, the Goddess Elazonia," the Demon King managed, stringing the words together carefully.

His only desire was to save his beloved daughter.

A smile appeared for the first time on the Goddess Elazonia's face when she heard him.

"Sleep for an eternity, wrapped in icy arms. *Ice Coffin.*"

All the heat was leeched from the air, layering ice on the Demon King's huge body. Having promised to submit, the Demon King didn't resist, and he was quickly encased in its pillar.

"Daddy!" screeched Rino.

Elazonia flung her over in Shinichi's direction. She then launched a gigantic *Fireball*, one that would burn them until nothing remained.

Shinichi couldn't run. All he could see was the red flames growing larger and—

"Hi-yah!" Arian leaped in front of them, slicing the attack in two.

The two parts split and missed them, causing huge explosions over their shoulders. The Red Hero stood face-to-face with the Goddess.

"Run!" she shouted.

"Arian…?" asked Shinichi.

"Hurry!" she shouted again.

Her hands were shaking slightly. She knew there was no way she could defeat the Goddess, but she stood there trying to save the people she loved. The Goddess's face twisted in distaste as she looked at Arian.

"Fool," she said with a cold, disdainful stare.

With that, Arian's status as a hero, the Goddess's symbol on her right hand, began to shine. Magic was getting extracted from her body.

"Aaaaaaahhh—!" Arian let out a blood-curdling scream as magic flowed out of her body, absorbed by Elazonia, who shined even more.

"Have you already forgotten that you pledged that body to me?"

Elazonia spoke of the binding contract with the heroes—to give their body and magic and even life if necessary to the Goddess in exchange for her protection. There was no way a hero could resist Elazonia as she was the holder of that contract.

That's why Arian switched her magic sword to her left hand, still screaming in pain as her body was drained of its power, and—

"Aaaaaaah—!"

—she cut off her own right hand, including the proof that she was a hero.

"Hmm…," said Elazonia, slightly surprised.

But Arian was losing too much blood. She fell to her knees.

Elazonia looked at her and her expression returned to its emotionless state.

"How pitiful, half-dragon girl. I will end your pain." She began to cast a spell that wouldn't even leave dust behind, but Arian gripped her right arm with her left hand to stem the flow of blood and forced herself to stand.

"I won't let you…because I'm Shinichi's hero!"

"Arian…," whispered Shinichi, forgetting the warmth from the young girl in his arms for a moment as he watched Arian struggling to save them.

What should I do? What can I do?!

The Demon King was captured and imprisoned in ice. Arian had lost a hand. Celes was pressed against the floor by *Hyper Gravity*. Even if she could move, she didn't have any magic left.

Rino had magic left, but she was so confused and frightened by Fey's death and her father's imprisonment that she collapsed on the ground crying, not even able to run.

Am I going to die here?

He'd gained the heroes' hatred through protecting the demons by doing whatever he liked. He had prepared himself for the possibility that he'd be killed someday. But he just couldn't accept that he would die without attempting to protect Arian, Rino, and Celes.

But I don't have any moves left.

He'd run out of his genius plans. Elazonia was gathering the destructive light of magic in her palm.

Before she could launch the spell, a magic circle suddenly appeared below their feet.

"What?!" cried Shinichi in shock as light surrounded him.

He felt dizzy as he disappeared from the Demon King's castle.

It was unfortunate that it happened while Elazonia was in the middle of casting a spell. It meant she wasn't able to prevent it from going off. All she could do was watch them escape.

"Not too bad," she murmured to the empty room, clicking her tongue in annoyance. She stared at the Blue Demon King encased in ice. "How fancy. Using delayed spells."

They had escaped with the help of a delayed *Teleport* spell. The Demon King must have cast the spell in the few seconds when her attention wasn't on him. It must have been when she was casting *Create Life* to shut down that dangerous advisor of his.

"Your memories indicated you were a dimwit, but I suppose you are a fair strategist yourself."

She was mildly impressed as she searched the area, but she couldn't find signs of any demons. That single moment had allowed not only Shinichi's lot to escape but also almost a hundred other demons in the castle.

"What powerful magic." Even though he was the detested enemy, she affectionately stroked him through the ice.

"Everything was worth it."

She had gained something from her roundabout strategy of wriggling her way in under cover and waiting for the right opportunity. She relished her victory for a moment then peered at the spot where Shinichi had disappeared, staring deep below the floor.

“Is that where you ran to? So troublesome.” She clicked her tongue again but quickly raised her head like she’d lost interest. “There is nothing he can do anyway.”

She had already captured the Demon King. He was the only one capable of harming her. The half dragon was a threat because of her potential, but as long as she was a hero, she wouldn’t be a real enemy. By the time the Demon King’s daughter had grown enough to attempt revenge, Elazonia would have accomplished her goal anyway.

“Enjoy what little life you have left,” said Elazonia toward the depths below the surface, a cold smile on her face.

And then she disappeared with the Demon King encased in ice.

After a long period of dizziness, Shinichi found himself standing in a blue field of grass.

“This is…”

Everything in his sight was bathed in blue. The strange landscape gave him the impression that he’d gone to the afterlife, but Celes refuted his first assumption, standing up on unsteady legs now that she was released from *Hyper Gravity*.

“This is the demon world,” she said and pointed upward.

His eyes followed her finger, and he craned his neck up to see the light that lit this realm.

“The blue sun,” he said.

In the russet sky, the light was a cool blue but still gave off warmth. This was the sun under the ground. It expressed more clearly than any words that this was a world entirely different from the surface.

“Why are we in the demon world?”

“My guess is that His Highness used his final bit of power before he was captured…,” said Celes.

Shinichi turned around and saw that they weren’t alone. There were all the faces he had gotten to know at the Demon King’s castle—Sirloin the orc, Kalbi the minotaur, each one of them baffled at the strange and sudden events.

“Oh my God, Arian?!” cried Shinichi, suddenly remembering how she had cut her right hand off just before. When he looked frantically around for her, he found her collapsed on the ground with Rino crying over her, unbound from her chains.

“Arian, hold on!” she begged.

“Rino, calm down. Start by using healing magic to stop the bleeding,” said Shinichi.

“Stop the bleeding… Umm, uh…ugh!” Tears streamed down her face as she panicked and tried to cast a *Healing* spell, but all she could see in her

head was Fey and her father. She couldn't form a solid image to cast the spell.

"Lady Rino, let me try," offered Celes, trying to force some last reserve of magic from herself to cast the spell.

But right as she did, a gust of wind hit them.

"What…?"

"Heal all wounds, *Full Healing*."

They sat there dumbfounded as a figure appeared and cast a spell. It didn't just instantly heal Arian's severed hand but Celes and Shinichi's wounds, too. Their jaws dropped open in shock when they stared at the woman whose hair was bluer than the sun. A soft smile appeared on her face.

"It's been too long, Rino, Celes."

She was youthful and beautiful with the appearance of a human. She could be called a young woman. But they knew those slender arms could pierce through steel and that magic could level mountains.

She was the wife of the almighty Blue Demon King, the only person who could compare to his strength. She was—

"Mommy?!"

"My Lady?!"

Rino and Celes cried out in surprise and delight at the sight of the Blue Princess of War, Regina Petrara Verlum.

That was followed by loud whoops from the demons when they realized who had made an appearance.

"Lady Regina, you've returned! *Oink!*"

"His Highness was doing so poorly ever since Lady Rino went on her trip. *Moo!*"

"Please, please. I can't understand a thing you say when you all speak at once," said Regina with a wry smile, trying to pipe down the demons as they made a big fuss, failing to explain things properly.

"All right, what exactly has happened? I get the impression it's something fun." She turned to Shinichi and Arian in amusement—they were humans who shouldn't be in the demon world. "And I don't see my husband. Has he wandered off and left our precious daughter all alone?"

"Well…," started Celes, but her words stuck in her throat.

"Daddy…," said Rino, tears welling up in her swollen eyes.

Regina looked at everyone and the strange situation and a fleeting grimace passed over her face.

“Seems something bad has happened. The castle is nearby. Let’s discuss everything once we get there.” She guessed the story would be hard to tell and decided to put it off until later.

Shinichi picked up his slumbering childhood friend and followed her to her castle.

Goddess Elazonia…

His brain started to turn now that they had temporarily escaped her clutches.

She killed Fey.

Based on Fey’s bewildered expression, she had known nothing about Elazonia using her. That made it the easiest for the Goddess to get close to them.

When he had misled Clarissa during their *Liar Detector* with lies of omission, he had been using only the second-best method for deceiving people. The best method was when the con artist had no idea of what they were doing.

Without ill will and lies, neither *Liar Detector* nor any interrogation skill could ever pick up that the person wasn’t speaking the truth. Even if it wasn’t the absolute truth, it was the truth to them.

I bet she messed with Fey’s memories, too.

When Bishop Hube got his powers from the Goddess, Shinichi heard that he had wiped the criminal’s memories and turned them into obedient dolls. There’s no reason the Goddess herself wouldn’t be able to achieve something similar.

Fey, how much of you was her?

Elazonia had called Fey a fake. If Shinichi’s assumption was correct, even her desire to be an explorer could have been manufactured…

But you were so alive…

She’d admired Shinichi as her mentor. She had shielded Rino when the legion attacked. Her eyes had sparkled when her dreams of becoming an explorer came true.

And Elazonia killed her. She used Fey for nothing more than to create an opportunity to take Rino hostage in front of the Demon King.

And it wasn’t just Fey.

He looked at the face of the sleeping girl in his arms.

She couldn’t kill me.

If she had killed Shinichi, Rino might have lost control of her magic and blown Elazonia away. Either that, or the others would have stopped caring what happened to themselves, and the Goddess would have had to deal with the combined attacks of Arian, Celes, and even the Demon King. He wasn’t sure why, but Elazonia’s goal was to capture the Demon King, not kill him. Fighting him must have been very inconvenient for her.

That was why she couldn’t kill Shinichi, but she couldn’t let him run his mouth, either. She had needed a way to silence him and had used Nozomi just for that purpose, opening old wounds in the process.

…She won’t get away with this.

His calm heart was starting to burn like molten lava. He had been fed up with all the times that she’d brought suffering to the heroes and with the corruption of the church, but he hadn’t even been certain of her existence. Back then, he hadn’t felt any defined hatred toward her. But he had watched her kill the explorer—their *friend*—in front of him and use his childhood friend against him.

Things were different now.

Goddess Elazonia. I will destroy you, no matter what it takes!

It wasn’t for anyone else’s benefit. As he walked into the demon world, lit by the blue sun, Shinichi Sotoyama swore to defeat the Goddess who had created the undying heroes, even if it meant sacrificing his own life.

Afterword

Hello to readers of the Famitsu Bunko imprint.

It's me, Sakuma Sasaki—the guy who tried not to judge stargazy pie by its cover but got the hint when I couldn't find it in any restaurants or online catering forms… Like, none at all.

I imagine a few of you are aware that there's going to be a television commercial for *The Dirty Way to Destroy the Goddess's Heroes*. By the time you have this volume in your hands, I think it will have already aired.

You can view it on Famitsu Bunko's official website: *FBonline* (http://fbonline.jp). Take a look if you're interested. This is just another thing that was only possible with your support.

This might be considered an unsavory topic to some, but we decided to make a commercial because the ebooks had a slight edge over the sales of physical copies. I was a little mystified when I realized that was the case. Around the same time, I experienced the turn of the digital age.

You know, ebooks are really convenient. Even I've started switching to digital, bit by bit.

I think the biggest allure is that they don't take up any physical space, even if you buy all the books in the world. But for country dwellers like me, the best part is that I can immediately buy books I feel compelled to read.

Plus, there are discounts and free previews all the time, which definitely draws in new readers.

As a huge geek, I guess my only qualm is that ebooks don't come with all the bells and whistles of a physical book. Obviously, it's not going to come with exclusive audio drama CDs or have special editions. No half cover on *Drifters* as a salute to OG fans. No survey postcard in *YuruYuri* that's too cute to send back… As a fan, these items are essential.

I don't imagine print publishing dying out as long as geeks have a stake in it.

"In other words, abandon your attachment to material possessions (including physical books)! Move to the immaterial (data of ebooks)! That's the first step toward achieving Buddhist enlightenment!"

I'm not sure how the monks would take me claiming that, so I think I'll stop myself there.

It seems I prattled on long enough to use up my space.

I'll get started on my acknowledgments.

I want to extend my gratitude to my illustrator, Asagi Tosaka; my main editor, Kimiko Gibu; those involved in making the commercial and publishing the book itself; and—of course—to all of my readers. That's it from me for now.

Sakuma Sasaki, January 2018

Afterword

Hiya, it's me, Asagi Tosaka.

Can you believe we're already on the fourth book of this series? I mean, new characters just keep cropping up!

You know, I always end up falling in love with these characters—they've all got their little quirks, and each one is boatloads of fun. This makes it harder for me as the artist, but I have a blast drawing them every time.

Out of all the new characters in this volume, I'm a little partial to Clarissa the light elf!

Wow, the ending of this book was really something. I can't wait to see how everything plays out...!

And Fey! Is this really the end for her? Or is there something else in store?

I mean, she fits the bill perfectly for a tropey character with glasses! A precious thing, indeed!

All right, well, I hope we have a chance to see each other again.

遠坂あさぎ

Asagi Tosaka

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

Contents

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright
Prologue
Chapter 1: Nature Venture with the Demon Diva: Who Are Those Mysterious Long Ears Living in the Secret Forest?!
Intermission: A Day in the Life of the Saint
Chapter 2: Dark Depths
Intermission: A Day in the Life of the Holy Mother
Chapter 3: Screams of the Dead
Intermission: A Day in the Life of the Demon King
Epilogue
Afterword
Yen Newsletter